



MARRIED
TO THE
DEVIL
LILLIAN LARK

MARRIED
TO THE
DEVIL



LILLIAN LARK

CONTENTS

Content Warning

1. Stella
2. Stella
3. Remy
4. Ben
5. Stella
6. Ben
7. Stella
8. Remy
9. Stella
10. Ben
11. Stella
12. Remy
13. Ben
14. Stella
15. Ben
16. Stella
17. Remy
18. Stella
19. Ben
20. Stella
21. Remy
22. Ben
23. Stella
24. Remy
25. Stella
26. Remy
27. Ben
28. Stella
29. Stella
30. Ben
31. Remy
32. Stella
33. Ben
34. Stella
35. Ben
36. Remy

- 37. [Stella](#)
- 38. [Ben](#)
- 39. [Stella](#)
- 40. [Ben](#)
- 41. [Stella](#)
- 42. [Ben](#)
- 43. [Remy](#)
- 44. [Stella](#)
- 45. [Remy](#)
- 46. [Stella](#)
- 47. [Remy](#)
- 48. [Stella](#)
- 49. [Stella](#)
- 50. [Ben](#)
- 51. [Stella](#)
- 52. [Remy](#)
- 53. [Stella](#)
- [Epilogue](#)
- [Ben](#)
- [Stella](#)

[Note From the Author](#)
[About the Author](#)

Married to the Devil

Copyright © 2024 by Lillian Lark. All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, locales, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

Editor: Ellie, My Brother's Editor

Proofreader: Debbie, My Brother's Editor

Cover Artist: Lillian Lark

 Created with Vellum

*To my loving husband,
someday I'll forgive you for causing me to harbor an invading force that
demands I take naps daily and kicks me in the kidney.
She better have your laugh.*

CONTENT WARNING



Dear reader,

Married to the Devil includes an open relationship with pain play, jealousy, breeding, pregnancy, and the threat of violence against a pregnant woman.

Mentioned but not experienced by main characters: trafficking and child abduction.

Be kind to yourselves,
L. Lark



STELLA

FUCKITY FUCKSTICKS, I've really done it now.

The thudding of my heart makes it hard to focus.

The last few days have been a whirlwind leading to this very moment. I stand in the middle of a hotel room. It's luxurious in shades of cream and gold but dominated by the giant bed behind me.

I don't spend much time looking around. My attention is solely on the open doorway where a tattooed gargoyle speaks softly with the guards there.

The dust is settling like after a seismic event, but my insides still quake.

Our guests are enjoying themselves in the hotel ballroom a few floors below us. The wedding ceremony was tense, each contingent expecting violence from the other, but this location is neutral ground, and the bar is open.

Which leaves me alone with my *husband* for the first time.

Holy fucking shit, I'm married. Each breath I take threatens to escalate into a panic attack at the uncertainty of what lies before me.

But I chose this. I chose what I gained from this anyway. Now I'm dealing with the consequences.

Everything has been a rush. Shutting down my charm making business, signing the engagement contract in blood so that my best friend's dragon mate could dispose of my father. The monstrosity of a wedding full of false congratulations.

I haven't even told my mother yet.

I shelf the guilt of that. She would have tried to interfere if she had known. I have a little more time. I'd surprised her with a long cruise when I committed to helping the dragon Kalos take down Lorenzo Leonid.

And now, I have my revenge. The man who rejected my mother and ruined her family after I was a born a witch, rather than a lion shifter, is dead.

I just never knew the cost would be so high. Or that the burn of righteous anger would leave a hollow feeling in my chest that gives more room for the chaotic anxiety of my heart.

In order for Kalos to destroy a fellow territory leader, Lorenzo had to be dethroned from within. Since I'm his oldest daughter, whether he claims me or not, my chosen mate would be able to usurp my father while still keeping within our laws.

Enter Remy Stoneheart. A territory leader eager to grow his holdings who doesn't mind upsetting those in power.

Even facing away from me as he closes the doors to the room, Stoneheart is as intimidating as his reputation. His dark wings take up space even as they clasp around him like a cloak. The black swirling ink on his chest that distracted me during the ceremony continues over his shoulder and down his spine, the top part obscured by his dark hair pulled into a low ponytail.

A gargoyle with no lineage who ruthlessly built a sizable territory within a decade by conquering small holdings one at a time. He'd earned the title the Devil from enemies and allies alike through his ambition and cold-blooded calculation.

And now he has another title, my husband.

"What now?" I ask.

Stoneheart turns toward me, his horns gleam under the soft light of the room as if they've been polished. He isn't as formally dressed for the occasion as I am, only wearing his usual dark kilt that leaves the gray skin of his chest open for ogling. If one dares to.

The heavy silver rings that generally grace his fingers are absent tonight. The small hoops decorating his ears remain, but he's removed the labret piercing through his lower lip. I only glance over the mystery before his voice derails my pondering.

“We commence with the wedding night, *wife*.” His deep voice would have been pleasant if there weren’t an edge to it.

I try to not flinch at the new role I’ve received. This whole situation is ill fit to me. I was a simple witch. Powerless to the politics and feuds that dictated the beginning of my life. A pawn on the chessboard that had already been discarded because of a freak accident of genetics.

My pride and joy had been taking the business I’d poured my time and effort in from scraping by to success.

And now that’s gone. I’m a co-territory leader. A wife to this enigmatic gargoyles who most speak of in whispers.

“Oh.” My exhale is a little shaky. I knew this was coming.

We can’t afford to give the Council who governs the magic community a reason to doubt this union. They’re greedy for legal grounds to strike against Kalos.

Of course we will be consummating the marriage tonight. I nod. “All right,” I say more to myself than to him. I wipe my hands on my dress and wish that I still held the bouquet of flowers I’d walked down the aisle with if only to have something to occupy my hands.

The memory of the small blue blooms irritates me enough to cease my fidgeting.

Stoneheart prowls toward me, each step a confident rolling motion, and I swallow. The connection that sparked the first time we met still exists. It strums like a string, pulling me forward a step.

I have a confession.

I’m attracted to my husband. I’ve been attracted to him since he showed up at my shop and offered me this exact agreement years ago. His face is too strong to be considered beautiful, but the lines of it and the sharp angles of his form still have my fingers itching to explore.

But I turned him down then.

My body had responded to his unforgiving presence as he’d laid out the terms, and a naïve part of me had wished that he’d just ask me out rather than use me to plot his power journey. But I wouldn’t have been able to accept that invitation either. Not while knowing the real reason for his interest in me was in what he’d gain with our joining, the sanctioned war it would start.

I wanted my revenge, but I'm not so selfish that I could justify the blood that plan required.

And now we're here. Married.

It's awkward...but he probably doesn't even remember offering to marry me, never thought of it after he calmly nodded and left. I'd expected anger, but there was none. It was only business.

I didn't expect to think of him over the years. To imagine what it would have been like to accept the offer from this gargoyle with the power to make my breath catch. The interaction infected me.

I'd compare every date to Stoneheart whether I wanted to or not. Every man I'd cradle between my thighs for a night, I secretly wondered how different the act would be with him. Even wished I hadn't been quite as quick to reject his offer.

But the morning after would bloom and all the same reasons I didn't accept were illuminated by the light of day.

Still, I kept my ears open to the politics. I'd watched him gain more standing and power until he became a force similar to Kalos. Until the Council wouldn't allow him to grow by taking over neighbors anymore.

I almost expected him to make the offer again...

As he stops a step away from me, nerves flutter in my stomach, and the discomfort tightening my lungs isn't fear, it's awareness. My skin tingles and itches under the tight wedding dress that was nothing like I would have guessed I'd want to wear, but instantly needed once I saw it.

Stoneheart raises his hand between us, the backs of his claws skimming over the pretty lace encasing my body before lightly resting on the skin over my collarbone. His eyes follow the motion, and I'm transfixed by the cool expression on his face.

"I must place my mating bite on you tonight," he says almost as an afterthought.

"What?" The word comes out loud in alarm.

"Did you think a wedding would be enough?" he asks, meeting my gaze in challenge.

A bite is serious business. I don't know the specifics of them since it's rare for witches to go through the process of being soul bonded, but shifters and others forge mate bonds through bites.

“Isn’t a bond risky?” I ask. If a bonded person dies, more often than not, their mate follows them.

My mind screams at me to take a step back, but I’m trapped by his light gray eyes. A part of me craves the dominance Stoneheart effortlessly exudes, aches to give him anything he requests.

He frowns. “Gargoyles don’t bond through bites. The claiming mark is...superficial.”

“Oh.” I don’t know much about gargoyles, even being as obsessed as I am with this one.

I’m still stuck on the fact he wants to bite me. We’ll be doing more intimate acts than that tonight, but something about that, the way his pale gray gaze burned into me when he said it, makes me hesitate.

“We did sign the contract in blood,” I say, but the moment lets me think instead of panic.

I’ve already come to the conclusion that he’s right by the time he makes a sound of dismissal at my words. The Council will press any advantage they have. Right now, we’re legal mates by marriage. It’s an arrangement that is fine for witches, but shifters would be hard-pressed to recognize it.

More so than the Council, the people in the Leonid territory won’t recognize Stoneheart as my mate without a bite to show for it.

I clear my throat and nod. “You’re right. You have to bite me.”

There’s a lightening of his demeanor and a rush of warmth fills my chest at pleasing him. His hand continues to hover up my neck and the tips of his claws scrape over the delicate skin there.

“Are there any sexual acts off limits?” His question is frank.

“Uh—” My skin heats under scrutiny as I think of all the things I want him to do to me. Each action that my mind brews up only serves to distract me from his question. “I like all the usual things,” I whisper. “Other things can be discussed as they come up.”

There. That sounds reasonable and confident. Not like my thoughts are clamoring under the surface at all.

“You enjoy submission,” he says, and it isn’t a question.

My cheeks burn hotter when I nod.

“Sometimes,” I say instead of *only with some people* or the even more embarrassing *only with you*. Because even though I’ve always had a little

bit of thrill at the idea of dominance and submission, I've never been comfortable enough with anyone I've casually dated to try it.

I don't know how he can even tell. I've never been called meek. I'm loud and curse as easily as I breathe. I've been called *chaos* by one man in particular...

He drags his claws through my hair, and the impressive updo weakens under his attention. He pulls away, one of the blue flowers pinned in my hair between his claws.

A forget-me-not. I freeze before forcing my shoulders to relax. There's no reason to react to it.

"Will your demon be a problem?" he asks, almost conversational.

"Demon?"

Stoneheart arches a sardonic brow but remains silent. He can't possibly know what the flowers mean, but perhaps he's picked up on the animosity toward him from Kalos's right-hand man.

I shake my head to dispel the illusion that Stoneheart can as easily parse my soul apart as read my interest in submission. "Ben isn't *my* demon, and why would he be a problem?"

Stoneheart twirls the flower. "He doesn't like me much."

"He didn't like me much either." To start anyway. Over time, things became murkier. "Either way, it doesn't matter."

"You're correct. It doesn't," he says, a satisfaction brimming the statement. He lets the flower fall to the floor between us before flicking his claw against the stone of the wedding ring he placed on my finger as if stating his claim. He doesn't have to use words. I wear his ring now. Anything that could have possibly sprouted between Ben and me withered the moment I chose to marry Stoneheart.

There's a pang of loss, but I smother it. *This is what I chose.*

Stoneheart's hands return to my hair, tugging one of the many pins free before dropping it. His wings unclasp, and I jolt with surprise. His movements slow as if asking permission. He's so much larger with them unfurled, like an impending shadow about to devour my soul.

The flesh is willing, and my soul? As nervous as I am, that bitch is craving this.

I nod for him to keep going, curious and a little surprised. I've never been with a paranormal who isn't human-shaped. There can't be all that

many differences than being with a man, but idea of him involving his wings in this dance of ours is new.

The talons on the hinge of his wings join the soft but sure action of removing the rest of the pins from my hair. The metal of each one sings as it runs over my scalp, the pearl ends adding the flavor of invigorating salt on the tip of my tongue.

Stoneheart can't know how the materials affect me. Each pull is delicate and heightens my senses so that the soft brush of his knuckles over my cheek is as arousing as if he'd stroked my breast.

I craft charms. Metals and stones speak to me, and I listen.

Perhaps he does know. The metal of the ring he placed on my finger sings a pure enough song that it's a quiet baseline. The pear-cut sapphire in the ring symbolizes fidelity and hums with comfort. There are no clusters of other stones to disturb the message. As a gift to a witch who specializes in precious metals and stones, it's a beautiful one.

It gives me hope for this union. With my attraction toward him, the careful way he watches me now, and the thoughtful ring choice, our relationship may bloom into a real mating rather than only a political one.

He pulls the last of the pins free, dropping it to the lush carpet with the wilted forget-me-not, and my hair cascades down my back and shoulders. Petals and the stubborn flowers that had been so artfully placed for spectacle join the pins on the floor.

My husband hums, his claws combing through the waves of auburn in a way that has my attention rapt.

"So pretty and bright," he says.

His approval radiates through me, and I yearn to touch him. Spread my hands over his chest. To explore him as readily as he is me. To claim some sort of ownership over this gargoyle who has occupied my thoughts.

But I'm ensnared by his purposeful motions, frozen. Caught between a want to disturb the heavy air around us and a curiosity to see where this goes.

Consummation. A mating bite. A future together.

His claw falls to the sweetheart neckline of the intricate gown and halts against the fabric, snagging. He pulls against it with intention, and the material parts a thread at a time. The ripping can't possibly be as

deafening as it is, but it fills my senses all the same. He moves slowly as he destroys the dress, his eyes taking in the expanse of skin revealed.

My higher brain functions should argue with his actions and call them wasteful, but my throat is tight. Something heavy pools in my belly as the tender skin between my breasts is bared to the cold of the room and the blaze of his gaze.

The bridal lingerie isn't spared either. As the fabric is destroyed, I'm freed from the constriction of the garment, though my breaths stay shallow.

The contrast of the leashed violence and the tickle of his sharp claw has a curling, sticky warmth growing between my thighs.

I'm trembling by the time he reaches my belly button. The top part of the dress gapes but has too much structure to fall away.

His palm slides between the fabric and my body, resting on the skin of my expanding ribcage. It's the first time he's touched me intimately. The kiss sealing our marriage at the end of the ceremony had been perfunctory.

This contact is a searing press, and a soft sound of surprise escapes between my lips at the suddenness of it. He makes an accompanying raspy purr to my quiet exhalation, but the sound cuts off almost immediately.

His grip moves up to cup my bare breast, and my exhale morphs into a whimper as he squeezes the weighted flesh. I tilt forward, unbalanced by the simple act, and my hands fly to his chest. My pale fingers contrast to his inked gray skin in a way that makes me imagine how he'll look on top of me. If we can get that far before the lack of blood flow to my brain causes me to faint.

"All soft and willing for me," he breathes, leaning in so that his words tickle my damp lips. "It doesn't matter if a lover wrapped you up like a present for me. You're mine now."

"I—" I start to question his words that clash with his gentle movements, but he steals the words from me with a devouring kiss. *I don't have a lover.*

His mouth and sudden cool flavor distract me from the pull of fabric biting into skin as he releases my breast to rip the dress apart. The sound is as harsh as the cold air as the fabric falls from me to pool on the floor. I break the kiss with a gasp.

Stoneheart doesn't give me time to adjust to being naked. He grips my hair and brings my lips to his again with a snarl that fries my thoughts and doubts.

He tastes like hunger, and I respond to his desire with my own. He wants me. Needs me. Will tear anything between us apart to get to me. It's a fantasy too enticing to keep my thoughts above water. My body falls into this seduction of few words and all grabbing hands.

There's finally an honesty to our actions. I can express how much I want him now that we are bound together. It doesn't matter that my desire for him after meeting a handful of times is foolish. Each scrape of teeth and flick of tongue entraps me.

I press myself against his exposed chest even as his arm around my waist pulls me in. My hard nipples brush against his thicker skin in a tantalizing tease.

I should be pushing away from the rough grip he has around me, but I moan into his kiss. The chemistry that has haunted me for years is potent. The wild nature of his taste and energy gouges deep into my better sense and rips it apart as succinctly as he'd done to my wedding dress.

Stoneheart lifts me from the ruined dress with ease, and my thighs wrap around him. The scant fabric covering my sex is already soaked, smearing his lower stomach with an embarrassing amount of wetness.

"So wet for me already," he says against my mouth. He lets loose a growl before my embarrassment can slow my actions, and the sound vibrates through me, causing my thighs to squeeze harder around him, my body shivering in an odd needy response.

I tighten my legs around his hips, but there is no corresponding hurry in his movements, no ready promise in his grip.

I nip his upper lip, wanting to speed this along, and he makes a warning sound, breaking our kiss. I grind my wetness shamelessly against his stomach. Something desperate needing him inside me.

"Please." I beg. "It's never been like this."

His eyes narrow for a moment before he tightens his grip on my hair. The pull on my scalp has my eyes rolling back. The world spins, and he lays me down on a soft surface that I distantly register as the bed.

He doesn't even wait to pull back the undoubtedly expensive duvet to the more disposable sheets below before licking down my chest. His

tongue is longer than a human's, with a tapered tip, and it makes me wonder what other anatomical differences he has.

"You won't rush me in taking my prize," he says against the center of my chest before licking over to suck my nipple into his mouth.

I cry out at the contact, and a delicious heat flows through me as my thoughts become stilted and slow.

That's me. I'm his prize. It's odd to be objectified and feel so cherished at the same time.

Stoneheart's mouth releases my tender nipple. His words come out on a snarl. "Your lover must be lacking for you to be so needy."

Lover. I almost growl in frustration that we're back on this subject. The feelings I have for Ben are mixed and based on a few interactions that I mentally locked away when I accepted this proposal.

He's a friend. Sort of. A friend who planned the wedding that altered my life and included sentimental flowers.

"He's not my lover," I say. "Never has been."

Stoneheart's eyes glint in disbelief, but my irritation is stalled by his mouth switching to my other breast.

The growl that rumbles from him feels possessive and something else I can't identify. The sound rattles my core. The swollen, empty feeling there intensifies, and the wetness brimming spills from me suddenly.

Shock has my thighs attempting to snap together, but his thick body between them stops the action.

"What was that?" I gasp out. It feels silly to ask, but his kisses aren't distracting me this time. My body is very clearly doing *something* when he growls.

His grin is sharp and satisfied. The light catches his fangs, and I shiver. "Biology, *wife*. You're my mate and are responding as such."

He releases another throbbing growl as if to demonstrate, and I squirm and whimper. The need flaring inside me at the sound is insistent. Not quite to the point of pain but approaching it.

The awareness that he can manipulate me so easily is alarming, but my hunger smooths over the reaction.

Stoneheart goes back to sucking on my nipple like it's a candy-covered treat, and I gasp. My hands slide to either side of his head, skimming over the cold rings in his ears on my way to dig my fingers into his hair. I catch

the hint of something heady from the metal, but my husband makes a disgruntled sound. His wing talons capture my wrists and bring them up over my head, trapping them there.

I pull instinctually against the grip but can't break free.

A fang runs over the sensitized skin of my breast and causes me to still on a shiver.

"Are you okay with restraints?" Stoneheart checks in with me. His breath curls over my heaving flesh, distracting me.

"I don't know," I gasp. Too riled up to reflect. I *need* to be filled. My hips move on their own, grinding against his torso. The talons release my wrists, the sudden disappointment stings and gives insight. "I think I'm good with being restrained."

But the grip doesn't return. Instead, his gaze meets mine. "Keep your arms up."

I swallow and grip the duvet dutifully. His eyes flash with a gratifying lust as the movement makes the tips of my nipples rise, and he dives back into the process of *taking his prize*.

The bite of his teeth around my nipple has lashes falling and my breath stuttering.

"Fuck!" I moan, forgetting my intention to keep my language "ladylike."

I grind against his chest with more intention, trying to get any friction against the liquid need. I could probably come like this.

As if reading my mind, Stoneheart travels down my body, licking my skin all the way like he's starving, and my flavor is ambrosia. He reaches my pussy and pauses. The warmth of his breath through the tiny lace thong has me mewling for mercy.

I'm so needy and saturated with his attention at the same time. The response of my body from his growls not having abated any. His sharp claws pull against the string of the panties. I make a sound of relief when the elastic gives way.

"Is this what your greedy cunt needs?" he asks a breath away from it.

I burn, his words an accelerant and irritant. "It would also like a cock inside it, but sure, we can start here."

So much for keeping the crassness out of my language.

He chuckles, and I'm about to release the duvet and yank the gargoyle by the horns where I need him, but heat engulfs me. My eyes roll back, and I push against his mouth. Any shyness that existed is gone.

Stoneheart growls, his fingers dig into the flesh of my hips and pull me up. He skips any tentative licks and goes straight to eating me, sucking my arousal from each lip of my pussy before spearing me with that long tongue.

I cry out at the writhing invasion, the tight grip he has on me keeps me right where he wants me, unable to escape from or run toward the sensations. I tighten around his tongue as it presses *deep* devouring all the arousal he's inflicted on me as we both groan.

"Stoneheart—" I gasp and break off before starting again. "*Remy*," I breathe, having never called him by his first name before. "Please!"

His eyes darken, and his tongue slides from me. He rakes his teeth over my inner thigh as if in punishment just as something pointed and smooth presses inside. Not a finger, but the end of his *tail*. My husband moves to sucking on my clit, and my body doesn't care which appendage of his is curling inside me.

I shatter. The orgasm is a hot flicking rush. He doesn't keep the stimulation going to prolong or press the climax higher.

Instead, he rises over me. I spread my thighs open wider for him to thrust home.

But he doesn't fill my aching core. His tongue slides over the crook of my neck. He grabs one of my arms still above my head and extends it to the side as he kisses the open space between my shoulder and neck. I have a moment to flinch in understanding before his teeth sink into the skin.

"Fucking, ouch!" It *hurts*. I don't expect the searing sting and tears to fill my eyes. The hand still in the duvet moves to grip his shoulder as if to push him away, but he holds tight a moment longer before releasing his teeth from my skin.

All of the sudden the moment comes into focus. My husband, my mate, is a stranger to me. Like he said, there's no warmth of an entwining bond, only a mix of pain and coldness.

Stoneheart makes a satisfied soothing-shushing sound that causes some of the muscles I've tensed to loosen. His tongue starts laving over the wound, the sting receding with each pass. His tail fucks into me again,

and I take a shuddering breath, blinking away the urge to cry as the charged nature of the moment slowly returns.

“I didn’t know it was going to hurt,” I say, feeling stupid. There’s a prodding disappointment too. A part of me wanted there to be some sort of magical bond between us. Some sort of balm to the fact that this is a marriage of convenience.

“Apologies.” His voice is still lust drenched, and the gravelly nature of it helps return me to the next order of business. His cock presses against me through his kilt, but he doesn’t rush. It takes a few minutes of Stoneheart licking and sucking my neck before the warmth of his skin against mine chases away the remnants pain.

“Mine,” he growls again pulling away to take in the mating mark on my neck. That growl goes a long way to sweeping away the memory of the pain. I tighten around his tail, wishing it was his cock.

I flex my grip on his shoulders, impatience finally taking over. I got a bite for all my obedience before. Now I want the dessert that was promised. My hands go for the fastenings of his kilt, but he bats them away.

He stands between my spread thighs and unfastens the garment himself. His tail slides from me in a rush that leaves me gasping even as I admire the true breadth of his body.

The kilt falls from his hips, and my eyes widen. His size shouldn’t be a surprise. His cock is proportional to his body, but I can already tell it will be a stretch for us to fit together. The gray skin of his body reddens and darkens over his cock. The head seeps milky precum as he strokes the full length.

There’s no hair to obscure my view of his anatomy. There isn’t *much* difference to that of a man. His shaft and head are similar in shape if much larger than I’ve had before, but the hard bulge at the bottom of his cock before his balls is *very* different.

Is that a knot? I don’t say it out loud because Stoneheart snarls with the next stroke. His other hand forcefully squeezes the bulge of flesh, and he erupts.

All over me.

Surprise hits me first, followed by his release. His seed splashes hot over my chest and stomach. A stray droplet hits my cheek. I freeze in

confusion even as my skin flushes hot under the cooling fluid that is already starting to thicken on my skin.

Stoneheart's snarl smooths, and he refastens his kilt back to cover himself. Each movement is efficient. There's no fumbling or halting. There's no sign of the gargoyle who could growl me to release if he wanted to.

Only one cool action after another. He doesn't even look at me before he turns away and walks to the alcohol cabinet.

I press up, and rivulets run over my lower stomach to where my thigh was reddened by the scrape of his teeth. The sting of my neck comes back to the surface as the lust drains away.

My confusion spirals, but Stoneheart's back holds no answers. His wings twitch as if he wants to soar away. The clink of glass as he pours himself a drink doesn't help.

"What—" I start.

The door bursts open, and I jump in surprise.

"Lord Stoneheart—oh, I see that you're busy. Apologies." I don't recognize the woman. She looks to be in her fifties in a neat pant suit.

I scramble and try to pull the heavy duvet around me in my compromised state, but the damage is already done.

The shine in her eyes is bright as she takes in everything. Me naked on the bed, covered in a mix of sweat and both of our fluids. I catch the flare of her nostrils that makes me assume she's a shifter and undoubtedly picking up the smell of blood in the air from the mating bite.

She bows her head in respect and swiftly exits, closing the door behind her, but not before I catch the guilty glance from one of the guards. Guards who were supposed to stop any sort of interruption... *Weren't they?*

Didn't Stoneheart lock the door?

Shock morphs into something else, and I start trembling.

The interruption was allowed. Not only that. The humiliation that's burning my cheeks sinks into the pit of my stomach and churning with the ice there, flashing hot and cold over my senses.

This was orchestrated.

"*You knew.*" My accusation is hoarse in the heavy silence of the room. He *scoffs*.

“That the Council would attempt to discredit our union? Of course. Only a child would think otherwise.” The words are so caustic that I’m glad that he’s sipping his drink and can’t see my face.

That’s me. A child in a game of words and power.

“You could have told me.” The bitemark on my neck throbs with the betrayal.

He sets the glass on the table, tapping a talon for a breath.

I want to see his expression, to see if this coldness is the reality I’d been too dumb to pick up on. But I’m bare and need a better shield before going into battle.

The duvet I tried to wrap around myself hardly covers anything. He’d skipped pulling it back earlier not because he was so eager for me, but because sheets would allow me too much coverage when the interruption came.

My throat swells and threatens to choke me with the truths of the pretty fantasy in my head.

“There’s no room for error or hesitation. The Council is stocked with predictable players just waiting for a lapse in judgment.” He sighs, and it almost sounds regretful, but the illusion that he feels anything for me, or this situation, is long gone when he faces me again.

“The trick to succeeding in this game, is knowing who the players are...” His gray gaze is icy and dismissive as he takes in my debauched form. “And who are the pieces.”

He turns toward the windows and opens balcony doors that I’d missed in my cursory inspection of the room. “Don’t wait up for me.”

I choke as the Devil spreads the wings I’d so admired and disappears into the night without another word.

STELLA

“FUCK YOU,” I breathe out finally, staring at the open balcony doors. Cold air seeps into the room and clashes with the heat in my cheeks.

The cold is the reason I’m trembling. Not from the sudden loss of my bearings. Not from the deep humiliation of being used as a prop.

Or is it rage? Rage would be more comforting.

Yeah. It’s rage. Fuck that manipulative gargoyle right to hell.

I wipe my eyes to hide any moisture there from myself. I can’t quite stop the gasping sob that catches my breath as details come from the woodwork of what just occurred.

He knows about my ability with jewelry. He must. He removed his rings and piercings so I wouldn’t divine his intentions from them.

I probably wouldn’t have been able to. I can only pick up emotions from jewelry when the piece is absolutely saturated with it, but that taste of something unfamiliar and heady when I’d brushed his earrings makes me curse for not paying better attention.

Once he bit me, he didn’t have to keep up his seductive charade.

There’s a deep irony to this moment. I chose this path to helping Kalos because I wanted to destroy Lorenzo for throwing Mom and me away. The anger toward him had burned and burned, but I’d known I was too minor of a player to make him pay in the way I wanted him to.

I’d married Stoneheart to make that strike. To stop being a minor player in the world of giants. And now he thinks I’m merely a piece for him to play with.

I'm not. I won't let him turn me into a pawn.

I have allies.

First things first, clean up and clothes. And maybe by then, I'll be composed enough to come up with a scheme. *Anything.*

My inhale is ragged as I finally take in the room. It's decked out in the kind of luxury I've seen fringes of while growing up, and it's unsettling.

This was the world I'd been slated for if I'd come out a shifter like I was supposed to, but that was wiped away. Mom was disowned when Lorenzo Leonid rejected her. Luckily, she'd had some money, and we were able to make do, but there's something about feeling so out of place with the lush décor around me that adds another sting to the situation.

I blow out a hard breath and stand, not bothering to keep Stoneheart's release from dripping. He can afford an extra cleaning charge.

I close and lock the balcony doors first. The snick of the latch helps me separate from the emotions that threaten to continue to rage.

I inhale and continue moving, pacing the suite, hating that his scent still has the ability to make my mouth water.

I need to wash this claiming away. A shower would be heavenly, but I eye the room doors doubtfully. I'm alone here and hardly protected. The guards standing outside are Stoneheart's men, and I've lost my trust in them. They didn't mastermind what happened, but they've been tarred by the same brush.

Anger comes crackling back to the surface.

I'm angry at everyone. The Council, the guards, the nameless woman acting as the Council's spy who will probably gossip about me to a territory where I have no friends, and *especially* my *husband*.

My skin starts to itch. I need to wash off, even if it's not a full shower. The bathroom is as outstanding as the rest of the room. As big as my bedroom at home and the giant tub has Jacuzzi jets. Bitterness flares at the back of my throat. I'd very much have enjoyed this whole experience if Stoneheart hadn't plotted behind my back.

There's a stack of washcloths that I make quick use of before I notice what's missing. I frown, looking through all the cabinets.

There are no towels.

What the fuck? Incredulous, I go back into the room to search the closets. The towels aren't the only thing missing.

My bag was supposed to be here with clothes and toiletries for the night and my cell phone. The plan had been that we spend the night at this hotel because it's neutral ground. The silent understanding was that we'd consummate the marriage, then move to the building in the Leonid territory where Stoneheart had set up his base of operations.

Did Stoneheart misplace my stuff on purpose? Is this a way he's trying to control me? My rose-colored glasses for him have truly shattered after his earlier stunt.

But his items are missing too.

As much as his true colors seem to be all asshole, this feels too elementary for him. The humiliation of the interruption served to confirm our mating with the Council. Me being trapped here with no towels only serves to diminish my standing...

I groan, and my eyes sting.

Shifters.

The more I think about it, the more sense it makes. Some disgruntled Leonids decided to poke the new leadership. It's juvenile, but I expected some dominance issues with this take over.

I want a shower and to pass out in a comfy bed, but that's not going to happen until I solve this.

This would be an inconvenience if Stoneheart were here. But alone? If I use the hotel phone, people will find out that he's gone. I'd have to wrap myself in sheets to speak with the guards, and that would be more debasing than I can handle tonight. I can't trust their discretion.

I'm familiar with the game of hierarchy that shifters play but fuck everyone. I'm a witch. I play by my own rules.

I blow out a breath. I have options.

I pull the sheet free from under my enemy, the duvet, and wrap myself in it. Immediately feeling better.

I kick at the destroyed wedding dress. The torn fabric is too similar to my ragged emotions for comfort.

I pick up a couple of pins that litter the floor, avoiding the memory of just how fully Stoneheart had played me with his seduction. The bitterness will be useful for later. Right now, my fingers itch, and I wish I had my tools.

I don't need my pliers or soldering iron to work my magic, but it would make it easier. The pins are ultimately wire and pearl and bite into my calluses as I twist the metal. The sting is welcome as I work.

There's one person who told me to call him if I needed anything. He didn't mean magically, but I'm nothing if not resourceful.

I pluck a flower from the carpet next. The energy that warms my fingers takes on a deep, sweet note that makes me want to press my face in and inhale. It wouldn't work. The magic is only picking up traces of the man who organized the flowers.

I have no talent for crafting a charm using plants, but *meaning* gives objects power. Symbolism may be a statement, but when it's used to communicate? To give one last message?

That's impactful...but only if he's thinking of me.

REMY

THE CHILL of the night does little to calm my blood no matter how much time I take to get to my destination. My wings are numb save for some painful throbbing. My mixed heritage makes me more susceptible to the cold than other gargoyles.

I land silently and open the balcony doors of the Firefly. We'd purchased this skyscraper in the Leonid territory last year. I've had my eyes on this territory for years. Lorenzo's time was running out. That he'd made an enemy of Kalos had worked well in my favor and sped up our timeline.

The penthouse had been empty last week, but my closest people are moved in now and ready to work. Our original territory is stable, and the Leonid holdings are well placed for us to merge it seamlessly.

Everything had been planned for and considered. Even my *mate*.

She's mine now. From every fiery strand of hair to her soft-parted lips.

I thought I'd accounted for everything.

But my reaction to her was more distracting than I'd expected.

The sensation brewing in my chest isn't foreign, but I don't want to dwell on it enough to name it.

Stacks of paper disrupt the clean lines of the dining table. Not that Silas would care. We have a place to do work like this, but he'd rather sprawl out in areas of his choosing. His attention is devoted to his laptop until he notices my presence.

My second-in-command raises a scaly brow. “And just what are you doing here?”

“Give me the progress report of what we found with Lorenzo’s holdings,” I order, ignoring the lizardman’s disbelief. I sit in a lounge chair facing the open area of the dining room and built large to accommodate my wings.

“You’re supposed to be consummating your marriage,” he says.

“She’s bitten. That will do for now.” Eventually we will need to consummate the mating...perhaps once I get my reactions under control it will be easier to convince her of that. Though the last sight of her cheeks reddening with rage attests that may be more difficult than I counted on.

He sighs and leans back in his chair. “What did you do?”

I scowl slightly, not liking his tone. “Exactly what needed to be done. The Council found someone to interrupt us. Just as we assumed they would.”

The mating is as good as consummated if the Council believes it is.

Silas’s lips thin. “And you left her there?”

I couldn’t stay. The wounded look on her face stabbed at me in an unexpected way. The discomfort is an unwelcome discovery. “We have guards posted, and I was done with her.”

Softening for Stella Elderflower would be a miscalculation.

He makes a gruff sound to vocalize his disbelief. “Your lust is choking the air, old friend. You’re lying out of your ass.”

“That doesn’t matter.” I tap my talons on the furniture, waiting for the report I requested.

Silas’s gaze narrows. “*Years*, Remy. You’ve kept track of her for years, and now that you have an opportunity for something real, you’ve left her alone after an intimate act that will undoubtedly make her feel vulnerable.”

Something *real* was never on the table. Especially not now.

“We kept track of her because it suited our needs for this strategy,” I say, gesturing to the penthouse our operation is set up in.

He rolls his eyes. “We could have figured something else out. You wanted *her*.”

I bare my fangs, but don’t deny it. Silas knows me better than anyone else. He’s been with me since I usurped my first territory. He’d been

managing the district while the actual leader had been living without a care in the world, cashing in favors he could never have paid back.

Silas had been the one who had kept the place as secure as it was but doing that without support was impossible. The territory was ripe for the picking and practically fell into my hands.

At my silence, Silas removes his reading glasses and starts cleaning them. The tension in his shoulders gives away that he isn't going to drop the subject. "Mates are to be cherished."

"And now I have her. We needed the mating. I don't *need* her." I only needed to possess the firefly that had caught my interest. That's it.

He puts his glasses aside to glare at me. "Actually, you do."

I clench my teeth in denial as he continues.

"This isn't a takeover by might. The Leonids are shifters and have more unity than any territories you've claimed in the past. They require the stability of your mating to accept your sovereignty. Perhaps even an heir."

Something sparks in my chest at that, and I stamp it out.

"It won't come to that," I say.

"Either way, we need her on our side to keep mutiny from happening. It's not like you to discount an asset."

Those who didn't know Silas wouldn't be able to read the concern in his features. Much of his emotion comes through the twitch of his eyebrows and the flare of the nostrils in his snout.

I'm behaving irrationally.

Fuck.

I can trust that she wants the power that she gained along with this revenge plot of hers. Perhaps that will be enough for her to overlook my actions...

Silas's worry morphs into suspicion. "This wouldn't have anything to do with her rejecting your proposal, would it?"

"That was years ago," I try and scoff, but it doesn't trick him.

We sit in silence for a moment as heat prickles the skin of my neck.

His eyes widen. "You're unhinged."

"She doubted my ability to obtain her revenge," I snap.

"Which was logical since you were an upstart with an oversized ego. That ego is still oversized," he mutters.

“You backed me.”

Silas rolls his eyes. “After you proved yourself. She didn’t even know you. You can’t hold that against her.”

Shouldn’t would be the more accurate term. The wisdom of that doesn’t dispel the distaste of her rejection any...or rather that she rejected me and accepted another.

The years we’ve kept tabs on her didn’t produce much reason for jealousy.

Not until recently.

“There’s another,” I growl. The register of the sound is nowhere near what I’d used with Stella. Those growls had scraped down deep in my chest, making my blood surge with need in time with the arousal I’d lit in her. This sound is fueled by an emotion I hardly want to acknowledge. Jealousy.

Silas makes a sound of understanding. “Ah, Kalos’s man? I thought our alliance was going to be dead in the water.”

Barnes had not hidden his emotions well. Which is odd for his position. One does not come to be right-hand to a dragon without having a certain amount of discipline.

“It’s a wonder that he made the offer at all,” Silas continues. “Though I suppose they had little choice.”

I wouldn’t have made the offer. I’d have crushed the Leonids before giving away the woman I’d claimed no matter the Council’s response.

“She says they aren’t lovers,” I say. Which would explain why the demon had made the deal.

Silas tilts his head. “Do you believe her?”

I consider that. I don’t *not* believe her. Not with her denials when her body bowed to my will. But whether they were physical lovers doesn’t matter in the realm of emotions.

There’s something between them—

“You can’t kill him,” Silas says, breaking my train of thought. “Kalos is not an enemy we can afford.”

“I won’t kill him.” No matter how much I want to crush any ownership he thinks he has over my wife. I slow the tapping of my talons as I consider. “That would be a waste. He could be of use.”

“I don’t know whether to be upset with your scheming—” Silas sounds tired. “Or to be glad that you’re acting more like yourself again.”

“He can teleport,” I muse aloud, ignoring Silas. The skill is very rare. If he doesn’t keep clear of my mate...

I’m lost in possibilities when Silas interrupts again.

“By the way, some luggage that I think is Stella’s was left with the doorman earlier.”

I frown. “Her items have already been dropped off.”

Barnes himself had been the one to do it and scowled the whole time. The man had been busy with putting together a wedding in a matter of days but had made the time to glower at me and ensure that Stella would be comfortable in her new life.

Silas shrugs. “There were no spells or charms on it, so I figured accepting the delivery was for the best. It’s in the entranceway.”

The oddity is enough for me to start moving. Two bags rest where Silas said. One of them is familiar because it’s mine.

I clench my jaw before running my tongue over a fang, wanting to enforce my will on this new territory as soon as possible.

“These are the bags that should have been at the hotel,” I say.

“What? That can’t be right.” Silas is next to me in the next moment. Grim exasperation lines his face as we exchange a look. “Someone wanted to inconvenience you.”

We are both used to this type of testing. We took over this territory bloodlessly. This type of prodding is meant to see just what my reaction would be.

“Find who did this.” The knowledge will be instrumental to the consequences. Something like this seems low-level, but... “And maybe you’ll actually have that report when I get back.”

I grab the pink bag next to mine and shake the lingering cold from my wings. I left my mate coated in my seed and alone in a hotel room, possessing only a wedding dress that I destroyed. No matter what past sins I blame her for, she doesn’t deserve this.

She had better be alone anyway.

BEN

I WISH the numbness of my fingers dangling the bottle of alcohol would spread to my heart. The night is a reminder that the world still turns, fall is in the air, and winter will follow. The rooftop of a dragon's home is a surprisingly good place to be alone.

I'm not much one for alcohol, but if there was ever a night to dull my feelings, it's this one.

And yet, I can't make myself uncork whatever bottle I snatched from Kalos's collection.

I don't deserve the numb.

No one is a fan of mine tonight. Kalos is still furious that I put Katarina and their unborn child in harm's way even though it saved his life. Katarina is upset with both of us that her best friend had to enter into a political marriage to get the Council to leave us alone and to deal with the Leonid threat.

And Stella...I don't know what she thinks of me, but she deserved so much better.

She deserved to be courted and to actually know who she was marrying instead of having to deal with the Devil.

I put the bottle on the ground before I drop it.

The sucking sensation in my chest is useless. Stella was never mine. She can make her own decisions.

It's better this way. What would I do with a mate anyway? It would only serve to distract me from my position. I have responsibilities. Kalos

is my family.

Stoneheart is a formidable territory leader. His enemies won't dare to move against him, and his people are loyal. I've kept an eye on his actions over the years. I'd even admired his strategy from time to time...but that didn't make watching her walk down the aisle any easier.

She and I could hardly hold a civil conversation through most of our acquaintance, but the memory of the moment that changed has sharp edges. Each time I run it through my mind it cuts a little deeper.

But I can't seem to help myself.

I knock on the door to the room Stella has been staying in while we resolve the situation with the Leonids. Her shop being ransacked made a compelling case to accept our protection. It also allowed her to help in finding where Katarina had run off to after the attack.

I mentally prepare myself until the door swings open. The sight of her is still enough to knock the air from my lungs, but I'm used to that. Stella is gorgeous, but one should pay more attention to her thorns to get through an interaction unscathed.

I'll never admit to anyone that her prickliness pulls me in almost more than her conventional beauty. Not that I'm immune to that. Her hair is down and flows over her shoulders. The copper highlights make my fingers itch to touch it.

She folds her arms and leans against the door jam. "What do you want?"

I clear my throat to corral my thoughts. I had a purpose for being here.

"I wanted to apologize for being an ass." I hold out the flowers that look more worse for wear after their journey through the shadows of the in-between.

"What's this?" she asks but accepts them.

"A gift." My ears burn, the gesture suddenly seeming beyond ridiculous.

Stella's lips curves in half question and half a bashfulness I rarely see from her, but when she opens her mouth, her words are exactly the type I expect. "You're giving me flowers? I know you may fantasize about strangling me, but it's too early to plan my funeral."

I cough to stop my laugh. She's always able to turn things back on me with a jab, and I'd be lying if a part of me didn't enjoy our banter. Crave it.

The shine in her eyes makes me think she enjoys it as much as I do.

The arch of her brow is as sharp as her teasing words.

"I'm sorry," I start instead of getting pulled into a satisfying exchange of quips. Quips that have lately strayed into the territory of angry sniping more than I wish. "It's a stressful situation, and I know I'm not helping you feel any better."

Stella glances down as if uncomfortable with putting words to the actions. As if we didn't mention it, she could forget the risk to her and her friend's life.

I continue, trying to distract her from everything and maybe share something about me that would help her understand. "It's always been my job to create solutions to chaos, and it's made me...inflexible."

"A stick-in-the-mud?" Stella teases.

My lips pull into a reluctant grin. "I'm very good at it. The most stable stick-in-the-mud."

She nods, her gaze taking in the haphazard bouquet. "I know. It's a good attribute to have. I'm sorry if I've been catty about it. I'm just worried about Kat. Thank you for the flowers."

The truce of our words rests in the air and make me want to linger.

"I saw them, and they seemed fitting. You know, wildflowers." My cheeks warm as she looks up at me.

The smile of her lush lips is wry. "Are you calling me wild?"

"Utter chaos." I'm suddenly breathless.

Her cheeks pinken. There's a beat of silence as the revelation crashes over me like the long-awaited crescendo of a song. I've always liked verbally sparring with Stella. It's only now that it occurs to me that it's much more than that.

"These are called forget-me-nots," she says softly her expression thoughtful, questioning the tension between us. "I would think that I'm someone you'd want to forget."

A foreign sensation rises in my throat. Nerves.

"You'd be wrong," I say.

And then I'd enacted a solution to the Leonid problem. A solution that put Stella as far away from me as she could be.

I don't deserve to drown my misplaced sorrow or to mark Stella's wedding with forget-me-nots, but some part of my soul wouldn't allow me

to let her be bound to Stoneheart without knowing that I...grieved for something we hadn't had the opportunity to explore.

The sensation in my chest tightens, and I gasp, pressing my hand to my heart as it to push it back into place.

This is something different than the emotions I've been wrestling with. A hint of floral citrus warms the back of my throat as surely and distinctly as if she were in front of me.

This is magic.

"Ben."

Her voice in my head is enough to make me scramble to my feet. All my thoughts about distancing myself from her fall away and only leave a certainty.

She needs me.

Her call pulls me through the in-between as surely as if a thread connects us. The shadows between planes that I traverse curl around me as if to usher me forward to the shining light of Stella's location. Anyone I teleport experiences this as an instant sensation. Only those souls with the ability to navigate through space and shadow can glimpse this world.

I already know where I'm headed to without Stella's call acting as a beacon, and I don't care if it creates a political crisis. She needs me.

Even if a certain gargoyle will undoubtedly be displeased by me showing up in their bridal suite.

The pull disappears as the shadows clear around me and reveal a luxurious, if generic, hotel room. My heart races as I take in the room looking for danger.

"You came," she says.

I frown. "Of course I came. Where is—"

I cut myself off when I take in her position at the edge of the bed. Stella is wrapped in only a sheet. That would be a distraction alone with the warm tone of her skin showing through the thin material, but the rest of the details jar my thoughts from where they should not go when in front of a married woman.

The usual teasing floral feel of her magic mixes with something darker and unforgiving that must be traces of Stoneheart. My nose isn't as strong as my demonic senses are to energy, but his scent covers her. The other scents of the room are more delicate: her hunger, blood, and pain.

Her eyes are red as if she's been crying.

Rage flashes quick, and suddenly I don't care about skirting around Stoneheart's ire.

"What did he do?"

Her eyes widen. "Ben—"

"I'll kill him myself," I snarl. Or drop him in Antarctica. I've never been, but I can make the trip for this. Even if the political fallout would be catastrophic since he's Kalos's ally.

"Kalos will understand," I say, responding to my own thoughts.

Stella is our responsibility. She was put in this situation for us. Because of me.

"No," she says, eyes wide.

But the shadows pulse in time to my raging heart. "If he's hurt you—"

Stella drops a twisted piece of metal to grab my coat sleeve. "It was consensual."

That one word, or rather her touch as it slides down my arm to take my hand, collapses the fury that has me sympathizing with the dragon I serve.

"I wanted it." She nearly chokes on the words, but they are clear enough that I can't believe any differently.

I look away. The jealousy that stabs me is painful, but I breathe through it. Though I don't want to stop touching her, I release her hand and shake myself out of my suit coat, wrapping the garment to cover her.

"What do you need?" I ask.

She clears her throat, wrapping a hand to hold the jacket together. "I'm sorry. There wasn't anyone else I could think to try and summon who would be able to get here without alerting anyone—"

"I said to call me if you needed anything, and I meant it," I try to gentle my voice. The strain in Stella's face speaks volumes. Along with the scents of the room and the wedding dress that will live forever in my memory pooled on the floor, the lace and beading ripped apart.

Bitterness fills my mouth, but I don't allow myself to reflect on anything other than her statement. *Consensual*.

Stoneheart and Stella consummated their marriage and enacted a mating just as they should. The bitemark on the crook of her neck is binding.

She didn't do anything wrong.

He's the one who is missing.

"I don't have any supplies," she says, snapping me from my contemplation. "The clothes that were supposed to be here, the damned towels even, are gone."

I frown.

"Stoneheart?" I ask, even though that doesn't jive with what I know about the gargoyle.

She shrugs. "Probably not."

"Where is he?"

"He left after—" She breaks off and blushes. It's a breath before she starts again. "Uh, there was an interruption, and he took off afterward."

An interruption? I must look confused because Stella inhales before explaining.

"The Council had someone interrupt us to ensure that we were...busy."

I grit my teeth at the nerve of the Council and our damned gargoyle ally. It would have served his purpose to let such a thing happen. I knew he was callous. I didn't think it would extend to this. Gargoyles are supposed to be protective of mates.

"I can get you supplies, but do you want to stay here?" I ask.

She sighs and stands shuffling with the sheet wrapped around her.

"Honestly, I want to take a shower."

The willpower it takes for me to not entertain the visual of that with her half-dressed in front of me is shamefully high. I grit past the urge to clearer thoughts.

The wedding makeup tries its best, but it doesn't disguise her weariness. She'll be needing to sleep along with that shower, but she can't trust Stoneheart's guards. Can she even trust Stoneheart at this point?

"I'm so sorry, Stella." It slips from me without my meaning to.

Her eyes water for a moment, making them seem bluer. "It's not your fault."

But it is. I take a step toward her without meaning to.

The mix of energies and scents on her don't make me long for her any less.

"I wish this could have been different." It's a selfish thing for me to say. Littering her wedding with forget-me-nots is one thing. Saying such a thing now that it's impossible is another.

“I know...me too.” She takes a step toward me.

It’s been a difficult night. That’s the only reason she’s as close to me as she is. If she hadn’t just been humiliated by the Council and abandoned by her mate, she wouldn’t be looking at me like she is right now.

I step back. Not from self-preservation, though, if I touch her, Stoneheart will undoubtedly take issue, but because she is looking for comfort. It’s something I’d love to give her, but even though Stella’s nature is chaotic, she’s loyal.

She’d regret it if anything happened between us. It doesn’t stop my heart from throbbing.

She shakes her head as if realizing the way her body was swaying toward me. “I’m so sorry—”

The doors to the balcony break open. We both jump and spin at the sound of metal snapping and glass shattering.

A monster enters from the night. Or rather, an angry gargoyle.

Stoneheart’s gaze burns on me, ignoring his mate in a way that makes my fists clench. The sound emanating from the Devil is vicious, meant to warn me away by the fear it strikes. It’s a type of growl I’ve never even heard from a dragon, but I understand it’s meaning.

It’s a statement that unless I leave, he’ll follow through on my obvious death wish.

But I won’t leave her alone to face him.

And I won’t go down without a fight.

STELLA

“YOU WOULD DO WELL NOT to lock balcony doors, *wife*.” Stoneheart’s words are cool despite the terrifying growl he’d released at the sight of Ben.

“Is that a rule of yours?” I ask, forcing levity into the words.

I almost kissed Ben. The shame of that doesn’t make it any less true. After all the assurances I gave about us not being lovers, after vowing loyalty, all it took was Ben’s compassion for me to gravitate toward him like the most inevitable catastrophe.

“Among other things.” His eyes don’t move away from Ben who is so still not a single strand of his responsibly cut dark hair moves.

But there’s no fear on his face, only caution. I half wish he would save himself and teleport away from the gargoyle I married, but he doesn’t.

I swallow. “Maybe if we communicated about these things, we wouldn’t be in this situation.”

Maybe if we communicated at all, I wouldn’t have had to drag Ben into this. I don’t want Ben hurt, and I’m realizing now that I’ve brought him into danger.

“Your bag was delivered to the Firefly,” Stoneheart says, tossing the duffel at my feet with his eerie gaze still locked on Ben. The part of me that has lived my life by suppressing my need for justice and keeping my head down wants to snatch the bag up and run away, but I can’t do that.

“I called him because I was trapped here without towels or even clothes. If I contacted anyone using the hotel phone, it would have

displayed our lack of unity.” I project the haughtiest air I can.

He dismisses my statement. “You could have spoken to the guards.”

The ire I summon is real now. “Oh, of course. Let me parade myself into the hallway half-naked in front of the men who allowed us to be interrupted. Who knows what else they’ve been instructed that they can ignore.”

That gets his attention. He narrows his eyes at me, probably because he can’t deny my words.

“I’m rather short on trust for the people surrounding us,” I say as calmly as I can. I don’t verbally include him in that assessment, though it’s true. Insulting him won’t help Ben leave here alive. “So I called on someone I could trust.”

His gaze snags on the jacket Ben placed around my shoulders, and I feel like I should shrug it to the floor, but I can’t. I refuse to. Stoneheart crushed me tonight. He ripped away my protective walls through seduction and left me naked.

Ben placing his jacket around me reminded me that *someone* still cares for me. I tighten my grip on it, and that deep sweet scent curls around me.

“I see,” my husband says. “And what do you say of your presence here, Barnes? You could have easily alerted one of mine. You didn’t need to show up in our room next to my naked wife.”

Ben’s body is tense, but it doesn’t stop the professional cadence of his words. “I wasn’t aware of the situation I was being summoned to. Stella was instructed to call if she had need of me.” His face is grim even as anger stews beneath the surface far greater than when I’ve heckled him over the months of our acquaintance. “Kalos will be displeased that you’ve treated one of ours as such.”

“One of yours?” Stoneheart asks with brows raising.

Ben glares. “She was under his protection when this deal was struck. Her continued safety and happiness are important to us.”

“To both of you?” he asks, prodding as a surgeon does, looking for weakness.

“She has many friends,” Ben snaps. “We will not allow her to be treated poorly just because you’ve placed a mating mark on her.”

“*Friends*, of course.” The disbelief of his words is choking. This whole situation only goes to prove his suspicion of Ben’s and my involvement.

Well, tough shit. Ben is right. Stoneheart can't afford to mistreat me.

"Perhaps in your rush to categorize me as a piece, you forgot that the queen can turn the whole game," I say.

Stoneheart focuses on me again. There's an acknowledging glint in his eyes, and he moves as if to assert his claim on me. The dominance emanating from him has a shiver trailing down my spine. My body still responds to him, and that has anger percolating in my chest.

Ben moves to step in front of me, and I raise my hand to his chest to stop him. The tension between me and my husband is inconvenient to my peace of mind, but it isn't violent.

"Do not touch him." Stoneheart's words come out as a hiss, and I freeze. He rolls his shoulders, but the tight air in the room doesn't dissipate.

I pull my hand away. This rule is loud and clear. He will abide by the fact I called on Ben. He will allow us to even be in a room together without destroying the demon, but he will not allow this.

Ben's hand flexes as if remembering where I'd already touched him tonight. The game we're playing is so much more dangerous than I've let myself believe.

I shouldn't have summoned Ben.

Stoneheart exhales slowly. His expression is impassive, but the sense that he's close to the edge doesn't vanish. "I suggest we move to the Firefly. Tonight."

I tighten my grip on the jacket and sheet around me, and he continues, nodding to himself.

"My most trusted people are there. Leonids and Council members won't cause us more trouble. Get changed," he orders.

I hesitate, not wanting to leave Ben and Stoneheart alone together. But Ben gives me a nod. I pick up my bag and shuffle to the bathroom, the sheet trailing after me making me take my time.

Once the door closes, I collapse to the tiled floor. I try and keep my gasping quiet. The gargoyle probably has inconveniently good hearing. Bathrooms have always seemed like good places to fall apart. Too bad I can't take the time to run a shower and hyperventilate as much as I want to.

I need to stay away from Ben for his own safety.

It had felt *right* to call on him, but Stella the charm maker made that decision, not Stella the bride of the Devil. The comfort he gives me will only make everything worse for both of us.

It takes some silent breaths, but finally I pull myself together and I clothe myself. I'd carefully chosen the deep blue dress cut in a classic silhouette for the fact that it's understated but classy.

People are judgmental creatures no matter if they are shifter or human. Dressing for the part of territory leader is the only thing I feel confident about in this new life.

I put the charm that kept the dress wrinkle free back in the bag and focus on preparing myself to join the melee again.

Ben is out there with my husband. I don't want him to get in a fight because Stoneheart decides to treat me like he can't stand me one moment and wants me the next.

I shake my head to keep from psyching myself out.

Ben has probably already left. That would be the wisest course of action.

It's not Ben who is gone when I exit my haven.

"What happened?" I ask Ben, handing him the suit jacket he'd wrapped me in and glancing around the empty room as if my husband is going to arrive in another dramatic fashion to startle us again.

Ben's hair is slightly more mussed than before, but I see no damage to his person as he puts his jacket back on. There's a short halting moment where he inhales, but it's over before I can question it. He gathers my ruined petal strewn wedding dress and pins, handing them to me. I hesitate before stuffing them in my bag, not wanting to leave the garment for people to gossip about.

"Stoneheart will meet us at his penthouse," he says. "It will be more comfortable for you to travel by teleporting with me rather than him flying you there."

I almost threw up the last time Stoneheart tried to fly me anywhere. I didn't think I was afraid of heights until he'd taken me away from a dragon destroying my father. We'd been witnesses, but the situation turned dire quickly.

It had given me romantic notions that he cared for my safety.

“He wants you to teleport me?” I ask. What about the no-touching rule?

Ben nods, and I don’t have to voice the question. “He’s given his permission for me to touch you over clothing.”

“That makes no sense.” When I was going to touch Ben, it was through his shirt.

He shrugs. “I don’t think logic matters. He’s possessive of you.”

I wish that didn’t make a deep part of me giddy. It would be so much simpler if I was unaffected by my husband now that he’s turned our marriage into a battle.

It would also be simpler if that same part of me wasn’t looking forward to Ben taking me in hand *through my clothing* to teleport me.

Emotions don’t matter. I’ll need to be made of sterner stuff if I’m to carve out a place for myself in my new territory.

I inhale with a nod. One last surge of tenderness gets through my tattered control. “Thank you for answering my call.”

“Stella,” Ben places a hand to my lower back, the most respectful place that clothing covers for him to touch me. “I’ll always come for you.”

It’s the act of teleporting that makes my insides sing, definitely not his promise.

BEN

“YOU’RE COVETING something that doesn’t belong to you, demon.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” I lie. Even now I don’t look away from the bathroom door that Stella closed behind her. It would be wiser to keep watch of the angry gargoyle beside me.

A point that is proven when in a flash of movement, his body is against mine, his hand gripping my throat.

I’m able to work through the initial panic of the situation quickly. This is only a threat. He doesn’t squeeze.

I can easily get away from him. I could make good on my mental threat and take him to Antarctica if I want, but that won’t resolve this.

I’m a demon of solutions. Though, this situation is messier than I’ve ever dealt with before.

There’s a height difference between us that forces me to tilt my face up to meet his gaze. His hands are larger than mine as well. Nearly fulling wrapping around my neck. I may be able to teleport him to a land of snow, but he could probably snap my neck just as quick.

Stoneheart’s eyes are a light gray that reminds me of icy clouds. His expression is blank, but he’s not usually someone who lets his emotions free. His energies rest against my skin, a subtle threat.

*“I understand coveting.” His voice is a measured calm that I hate.
“She’s a prize, but she’s my prize. Remember that”*

The skin of my face burns in a quick anger. “She’s more than a prize.”

He flexes the grip on my throat, but I still don't vanish into the shadows. I refuse to abandon her now.

"Yes. She is a queen," he says as if lost in thought. "She has power and influence all her own. Which makes her even more valuable. Do not try and steal my queen."

Does he really believe I can? "Stella can make her own decisions."

"That she can," he breathes.

He eases his grip, and the brush of his sharp talon and callused thumb over the sensitive skin of my throat stirs an unexpected sensation. The heat of anger in my face turns into something else, and I quickly try to remove any evidence from my expression.

It doesn't work.

Stoneheart's eyes darken in calculation. "You can touch her through her clothing to take her to the penthouse."

His words are so unexpected that it takes until he's speaking again for me to catch up to the topic shift.

"Any more than that will come with a cost," he says.

I open my mouth to rage at the idea that Stella's affection is something he can leverage but freeze when the dark energy that mixed with Stella's now flows over my skin with a similar taste. One of desire. The cost will not be a monetary one.

My confusion is quick, but I stuff it down mercilessly.

"I understand." I don't. If this gargoyle were anyone else, I'd think he just propositioned me.

Impossible.

He releases me and takes a couple steps away as if the interaction never happened. Maybe it didn't. Maybe I'm losing my mind along with the bit of my heart that Stella owns.

"She's not especially fond of flying." His mouth twitches as if he's suppressing a smile. "She will find your way of transportation much more comfortable."

"And you wouldn't?" I ask. It's frigid outside.

His arched brow is amused. "I'm not in the habit of allowing myself to be vulnerable to my opponents."

He's definitely aware I wanted to teleport him somewhere unsavory.

Want. I'm still willing to do it. If I need to.

The water from the faucet is icy, but it doesn't quite wash away the memories of the night before. My eyes still have dark circles under them, and I ignore my reflection as I get ready for the day.

Sleep did not come easily.

Sometime after dropping Stella off with Stoneheart's people, I'd made my way back home. I proceeded to pace until late into the night. At first, I'd contemplated whether I could get away with taking Stella away from Stoneheart or offer her the option anyway. That line of thought hadn't gone anywhere that Stella deserved to tread. It would only make her a fugitive if not completely undo the sacrifice she'd made for Katarina.

After dismissing all other options, the only way open for me to keep her safe would be to keep my feelings in check. Stoneheart's people are good. She will be well protected. Eventually each step I took left my mind blessedly empty.

At some point I forced myself to lie down, but that's where the underlying current of *something* in that moment with Stoneheart had caught up to me.

I scoff in the morning light.

He's trying to throw me off my game, and it's working. I don't know the specifics that occurred between Stella and him, but I do know that he's usually much better at tactics than leaving a mate alone.

Avoiding Stoneheart is the best plan of action. To allow myself to be entangled with either of them is a recipe of disaster.

With that conclusion reached, I head to the kitchen. The manor is light and cheerful even in the face of the battles we've fought in the last week. Now that the wedding is over, the only thing for us to do is rest.

The older couple in the kitchen pull a grin from me. They sit in the breakfast nook, tea and pastries half eaten in front of them. The budding relationship between our driver and housekeeper reminds me that good things have happened even as we've dealt with other challenges. The Leonid threat is all but over now that we have an ally in place.

Katarina and her baby are safe and healthy, and Kalos has the opportunity to really be happy.

"Maggie. Jensen." I greet each of them as I pour myself a cup of coffee.

“Morning, sleepy head,” she chides me, bustling from her seat to touch my shoulder before I can argue for her to remain comfortable. Maggie is a touch-oriented person. Her motherly affection exudes from her, and the motherless wretch I am, I love it.

“I half expected that I’d need to look for you passed out somewhere on the property,” Jensen says with a raise of his mug.

“You know me. I’m just a party animal.” My smile is wry. If Stella hadn’t called me last night, I may have very well been drunkenly passed out somewhere.

Maggie’s face softens, and she presses her hand to my cheek. “Of course.”

There’s a tingle of her healing magic against my skin, and the worst of the weariness fades. I make a small sigh of gratitude.

“I’m glad to see you pulled yourself out of bed,” she continues. The words are simple. She doesn’t go into any details, but it’s not like she missed my crush on Stella even if for the longest time I had.

“The day has to start sometime,” I say, my bravado false. The air in the room is of understanding. These people are the family I never had. I don’t like to worry them, but there’s comfort in knowing there’s someone to worry about me.

Maggie taps her palm against my cheek in comfort before pulling away. “Kalos was up early. He’s already in his office.”

I wince and grab a granola bar for a quick breakfast. With how that dragon has been with me lately, I don’t want to keep him waiting.

“He seemed in a better mood this morning,” she says.

“For my sake, let’s hope he is.” I pause after a gulp of coffee. “How is Katarina doing?”

“She hasn’t been down yet, but she must be doing better if Kalos is willing to smile.”

They are mates. Their bond isn’t strong yet, but Kalos is devoted to her happiness, and only she can break him from his usual grumpiness.

Maggie mothers me, but Kalos has been the only father figure in my life. He pulled me out of a bad situation and offered protection in exchange for my loyalty. He’s the reason I’m alive today.

And I almost lost him.

I would have died for him if I had to, but I didn't have the ability to save him. Only his mate did.

And I endangered her to ensure it could be done.

I'll understand if he never forgives me.

When I make it to the study, he sits on the windowsill, swiping through the tablet in his scaly black hands. Kalos almost never takes full human form. For the longest time, I thought it was to remind the people around him what he is, but now I think it's to remind himself. He is an ancient creature who lives in modern times. The world is new and messy, but his connection to the dragon part of himself is constant.

"Morning." My voice has a hoarse quality. I hate that he's angry with me.

Instead of making me wait on his imperious mood as he's done for the last couple of days, he responds immediately.

"Ben." There's no derision in his voice, and there's a lightness to him today. The stress that had lined his body last night has lifted.

"Katarina?" I ask, though I'm hopeful that his good mood is because of her.

"She's doing well." The relief on his face is stark.

"Good," I breathe. After the close call that endangered her child, she's been...off. I'm glad that she's healing. A little bit of the guilt that surrounds my heart leaves me. "I'm glad."

Kalos nods in silence. There's a moment where I relax. Everything had really worked out. Everyone in our family and territory is safe and whole. We did it.

He clears his throat. "I've received a message from Stoneheart this morning. He has an interesting proposal that I thought you may want to look at."

I take the tablet from him, and the warmth in my heart douses as I read the message. The wording is sharp and direct, making me think the gargoyle himself drafted this up. The offer is a surprise, but the real surprise is that Kalos is entertaining it. "What is this?"

Kalos frowns. "Stoneheart says that it would be temporary."

"Do you want me to leave?" I swallow the knot in my throat. I don't need a pity assignment if I'm being dismissed. If Kalos doesn't trust me anymore, I'm useless. "I know that I—"

“Ben. Of course not,” Kalos interrupts me, standing.

The hurt still settles in my chest and makes it hard to speak.

Kalos takes a breath before he continues. It’s the only indication that he’s struggling. “I’m sorry I’ve been taking out my anger and fear on you.” The statement is one that he’d never have given before gaining his mate. Katarina has opened the part of his heart we all knew was there even if he never exposed it. “Of course, I don’t want you to leave.”

I blink and nod, the relief powerful. “Okay.”

Kalos continues, “I thought you may be interested in the arrangement because you were...concerned about Stella. But it would make sense to deny the offer. I can tell him that the current terms of our alliance stand.”

“I am concerned about her.” Concern is what makes my heart ache...

He tilts his head. “But would it be wise for you to be around her?”

No. But I did this. It was my strategy that led her to this life. Even with my determination to keep my distance, I can’t deny my need to ensure her safety. She needed me last night. She could need me again.

The offer seems too good to be true. Since it’s Stoneheart, it’s definitely too good to be true. He must have some sort of plan with this, but my suspicion won’t keep me from stepping into his snare.

“I can keep it professional,” I say. “What about my work here?”

Kalos’s golden eyes observe me carefully. Is anyone ignorant of my feelings for Stella? Have I walked around with a neon sign above my head titled “demon heartsick for the witch who insults him”?

“You are invaluable,” he says. “But if this is what you want to do, I can move people around and hold down the fort. You’ve put so many systems in place that much of the work isn’t something that has to manually be done.”

He’s not wrong. I’m good at coming up with efficient solutions to problems. It’s my forte.

This type of a position with Stoneheart isn’t, but with my skills, I feel confident that I can remove Stella from any bad situation.

“Just until the territory is stabilized. It’s the least we can do,” I say, a small part of my heart cheering even as the rest of me is sure I’ve signed my own death warrant.

STELLA

“YOU’RE GOING to rot your teeth,” the woman introduced to me as Francesca says to the lizardman with green scales wearing a suit tailored around the tail he currently wraps around his bar stool.

“My fangs are fine, thank you for your concern. Life is too short for that cardboard you prefer.” The lizardman’s name is Silas. I faintly remember that he acted as my husband’s best man in my wedding yesterday.

He’s Stoneheart’s second-in-command and much nicer than his boss. Which he demonstrated by asking me if I slept well as he ushered me to the kitchen and got me coffee.

Anyone giving me coffee is obviously a friend in the making, even if his boss is a dick.

His sugary cereal of choice contrasts with the very serious, if polite, persona that he projects with his wireless reading glasses and the laptop he’s practically attached to.

Francesca narrows her eyes and continues to eat her whole grain toast which doesn’t resemble cardboard. I should know. She made me a couple of slices to go with her own. I’d declined the eggs and sausage that she’d made for herself.

She’s just as well dressed as Silas, but instead of a staid black suit, hers is a sharply cut burgundy. I’m glad I took my time in getting ready this morning. If I were in my usual leggings and baggy crop top, I’d feel unbelievably grubby in this crowd.

I'd donned a simple black sheath dress after artfully applying my makeup and blowing my hair out to sleek perfection without much thought. Perhaps I shouldn't have chosen a color used for grieving to mark the first day of being married to Stoneheart, but I gravitated toward the solid color. Being put together helps me feel more stable.

And it stems my envy of the other woman's composure. Francesca's movements are full of a power and grace that has her low, sleek ponytail flicking. From that and her large breakfast, I'm willing to bet that she's a feline shifter of some sort.

I may not be capable of being as calm as she is right now, but I can at least appear my best in the face of the unexpected.

This morning is not going how I assumed it would be. For one, I didn't know that there were other people living in the penthouse of this building with Stoneheart and I. Not that it bothers me. I like being around people and have a good feeling about these two.

Anyone who acts as a buffer between me and Stoneheart is practically BFF material.

Despite what he'd told Ben, Stoneheart did not meet us here last night.

When Ben dropped me off, Silas had been here to show me to my room and tell me where everything is. He'd only narrowed his eyes at Ben for an instant, but that was all it took for Ben to step away from me and bid adieu.

With his task complete, there was no reason for him to stay any longer.

That's why I'd given him a nod to leave me in this strange penthouse. This is my home now. I need to get used to it.

The less I involve Ben, the better it will be for him.

The entertainment between these two has been top notch so far. Maybe that's because I haven't seen Stoneheart today. He still hadn't returned by the time I went to bed last night after scrubbing my skin so hard it turned pink.

"Where is Fiona?" Silas asks.

"Don't ask questions about my sister that you don't want answers to," Francesca says in sing-song while scrolling through the news on her phone.

Silas's brow furrows in frustration. "If I didn't want to know, I wouldn't have asked."

Francesca shrugs. Her presence exudes an icy confidence that doesn't affect Silas at all going by the lash of his tail. "She's checking out the underbelly of the territory."

Silas stiffens. "Alone?"

Francesca gaze turns bored. "This is a shifter territory, Silas. We're shifters. She's fine."

Silas's mouth opens, but Francesca cuts him off with an eye roll like she anticipated his concern. "She took one of the guards with her. Connors, I think?"

Silas's scaled lips press together.

"You're not her father, though if you wanted to be her mate, she's certainly teased you enough to warrant it," she muses.

Silas throws one of his pieces of cereal at her, and she dodges it easily, her amusement not breaking.

"Careful now. Someone may think you're protesting too much," Francesca says, her brows high.

Silas glares into his breakfast. "Fiona is too young for such things."

Francesca's laugh burbles up with charming disbelief. "She's going to get you if you're not careful."

Silas glares before shifting topics.

"Do you know what you want to do today?" he asks me. "Fiona and Connors will get a good read of how the Leonids are taking the territory takeover, but their report probably won't be done until later today."

"So, any excursions better be planned well?" I ask.

He nods in acknowledgment.

The walls creep in. No casual walks mid-workday or spontaneously trying different restaurants like I usually do. Visiting my best friend will probably require a whole safety setup because she's Kalos's mate, and I'm...no longer a harmless witch.

I'm not a prisoner, but the terms of this new life will be stifling if I let myself think about it. Perhaps it will get better as the Leonids accept our place here.

Or perhaps the chaotic parts of me will be trimmed down to fit this role... Another cost I hadn't considered, but wouldn't the peace of a whole territory be worth that?

From my understanding, there hasn't been any bloodshed with this takeover after Kalos left the power gap when crushing Lorenzo, but that hardly means there won't be.

"For now, the Leonids are waiting to see what type of territory leader Stoneheart is. Small testing of boundaries will be expected." Silas gives voice to my assumptions. "There are a few individuals who didn't fall along with Lorenzo when Kalos struck that could muster enough backing to make a claim."

"But none of them have a clearer claim than I do," I say.

"Correct. There are exceptions, your brother, Leo, and uncle are presumed to be alive though they haven't returned to the territory, so we aren't concerned about them yet, and your other brother who is currently in Thailand has abdicated any claim."

I nod, thinking. Everything leading up to the wedding was planned by others. This is the first day after signing the engagement contract that I get to decide what happens next.

The witch part of me aches to commune with magic and wants to set up a space to act as my workshop to make charms. Even if my business has closed its doors, charm making pulses in my being. It's a large part of who I am, and I'll still need to make time to indulge in it if only to refresh my own charms.

But I'm not only a witch anymore. I can't afford to stick my head in the sand to craft all day when the people of this territory must be feeling unsettled. I don't know much about how things have functioned here since I lived in Kalos's territory, but I've heard troubling whispers. Whispers that I now have the resources and the responsibility to check.

I steel my spine with that conclusion.

"I'd like to catch up on any information you have on the goings on of the territory," I say.

Silas tilts his muzzle with approval. "Very good. We'll get you the reports."

"I won't be much help," Francesca says, though there's a lightness of approval in her voice as well. I think I've passed a test. "I've been given the responsibility of managing the rest of our holdings while Silas and the boss handle this one."

She must be as high of rank in Stoneheart's organization as Silas to be given such a large task to manage. Her bearing makes sense now.

"Where is Stoneheart?" I voice the question I've put off all morning.

It's embarrassing to not know the whereabouts of my husband, but neither Francesca nor Silas seems to think that.

Francesca shrugs. "Who knows? Remy does what he wants. Anytime Silas has tried to arrange an itinerary, it's useless within an hour."

I'm taken aback at her using his first name when no one else I know has, but she does work closely with him. Familiarity is to be expected.

Silas sighs, his annoyance clear. "He doesn't like constraints on his time. He'd prefer things to be flexible, so he has the most strategies open to him at once."

That doesn't sound conducive to a relationship. It's appearing more and more that this will be a marriage in name only.

I should be happy about that. It will allow me to focus on what my role here is.

Silas continues. "The library is where we set up our office for meetings and where you'll most likely find him if he's in residence. I'll give you a tour after breakfast."



"AND THIS IS THE LIBRARY," Silas flourishes a clawed hand.

The room is beautiful. The décor of the whole penthouse has an understated classiness somewhere between elegantly modern and cozy, but the library is where the minimalism dies. It's full to bursting bookshelves are made of intricately carved wood. What walls don't host shelving are painted a deep green. The furnishings are large and lushly cushioned. There's even an electric fireplace.

This place is somewhere I'd be comfortable curling up for a nap, but there's evidence that others are busy at work here.

A large table in front of the balcony doors looks to act as a shared desk. A map of this part of the city is spread over it. The boundaries of Kalos's territory and Stoneheart's previous holdings are marked out

around the area we are currently inhabiting. The Firefly is directly in the middle of this territory.

“You’ve been busy,” I remark. It’s an understatement. The penthouse is fully equipped and prepared as if they’ve been here for years rather than only just moving in.

The tour of the penthouse apartment included the hallway that leads to where Francesca and her sister Fiona live together and Silas’s own space. Along with different common areas that act as a gym, home theater, and living room.

Oh, and there is a private green space and swimming pool on top of the building that made me want to text my mom about the sad potted plants that she could remedy before I remembered she’s somewhere in the Caribbean right now and, more importantly, has no idea what’s going on.

Sad plants aside, Stoneheart certainly likes his luxuries. And balconies. There must be a balcony running around the whole building since every room seems to have access to one.

And I still haven’t seen everything.

“Where is Stoneheart’s room?” I ask.

Silas almost misses a step on his way to the large table. “That would be the room you woke in.”

The room and bed I’d woken up in this morning was as personalized as a hotel room. I’d assumed it was a guest room.

I suppose there is another closet that I hadn’t looked in before setting up my wards last night to warn me of intruders so I could get some sleep without being on edge and the shower in the bathroom is certainly sized for someone with giant wings. My cheeks warm.

I locked my husband out of his own room.

The bedding doesn’t even carry his dark scent of rain-soaked cliffs.

“He doesn’t sleep much,” Silas says, as if reading my thoughts.

“I didn’t think we’d be sharing a room,” I say.

Silas’s lips thin. “It would be better for the territory if you did. I understand why you wouldn’t want to...”

His eye twitches in a mix of guilt and discomfort. I try and push down the embarrassment threatening to rise in my throat.

He knows what happened last night. Or at least what Stoneheart told him. Which I can only hope didn’t include how easy it was for my husband

to seduce me.

“But appearances matter,” I finish for him. I wish I could demand my own space, but I’ve already sacrificed, what’s a little more pain for the good of the territory?

Even if it’s going to be awkward as fuck.

I see him coming this time. A dark shadow blots out the light before my husband lands on the balcony.

Speak of the devil, and he shall appear.

“Oh good, he’s home,” Silas says.

I wish I could muster a smile with how relieved Silas sounds, but the memories of last night are fresh. The heat of his mouth, the ice of the night air, and his countenance after the interruption.

His gray wings cut shadows in the morning light. It’s a breathtaking sight before they clasp around him like a cloak. Stoneheart catches my eye. The roll of his shoulders is almost smug before he moves toward the door.

This gargoyle enjoys making me weak.

What a dick.

“I assume you have wards around the building to hide from humans,” I say.

Silas snorts as Stoneheart enters through the glass doors. “And long-range spellcasters or anyone with a sniper rifle who wants to try their luck.”

Impossibly, that thought freezes my heart.

“Don’t look so happy to see me, wife. It would take more than a bullet to make me drop from the sky. The building has many protections on it. As do I.” He flashes the rings he’s placed back on his fingers at me and the knowledge that his jewelry must be heavily spelled has me relaxing.

“It would do me no good for you to be shot down with the territory the way it is,” I say.

His smile and accompanying low purr put me on edge because it would be so easy to relax in his presence, but I’ve already learned what a mistake that would be.

“Your worry warms my heart,” he says. “Has Silas shown you around?”

“Yes. He was just about to give me the records you have of the territory.”

Stoneheart only nods. “Good.”

The word holds no real approval like Silas and Francesca had. His expectations for me must be low.

“And what have you been up to?” I ask, keeping my wince to myself and hoping that my question doesn’t sound like I’m hounding him.

Stoneheart’s grin isn’t one that makes me want to relax this time. It’s one that says he knows something I don’t.

“I’ve been making arrangements to make your transition here more comfortable among other things.”

Why is that so hard for me to believe? Because he angrily ripped my dress off last night and scent marked me in a way that, while I’d enjoyed, left me feeling hollow and humiliated.

Because I can’t trust him.

Stoneheart picks up a cellphone from the table and checks his messages. “I have a surprise for you.”

“Oh?”

There’s a knock on the open door of the library, and we all turn to see Francesca leading Ben in. It’s jarring to see him after my mental decree to keep my distance, but that doesn’t stop his presence from being... comforting. Like my body has determined that he’s my safe place as much as Stoneheart is an adrenaline rush. He looks as he always does. Buttoned up in a good quality suit that doesn’t call attention to the wearer.

His gaze catches mine before he focuses on the gargoyle on the other side of the table.

“He says that you requested his presence,” Francesca announces. “Perhaps you should have cleared him with the doorman if that’s the case.”

She gives Stoneheart a pointed look before taking a seat at the table.

Ben’s jaw is tight, and the comfort of his presence starts to drain away. Why would Stoneheart call him here?

“This should be interesting,” Silas breathes, his eyes narrow at my husband.

Stoneheart frowns. “I figured you’d just use your abilities to teleport here.”

“That would have been rude without an invitation to directly drop in,” Ben says stiffly. “Many people would kill someone on sight who randomly appears in their living quarters.

“True,” Stoneheart allows.

“Why is he here?” I ask.

Stoneheart is back to smiling like a cat playing with a mouse. “You pointed out that you don’t have anyone you trust here. Barnes has agreed to act as your bodyguard until the territory is more stable.”

I try and keep the shock from my face. I’m not the only one surprised. Francesca and Silas stiffen.

“That’s unusual,” Silas says. “And generous of Kalos to entertain such a request.”

Stoneheart nods to the demon who keeps his eyes on him. “Barnes reminded me that Stella is Kalos’s mate’s best friend. They have a vested interest in her comfort and safety.”

He hadn’t said quite as much as that in my presence, but it’s true.

“If Stella would rather someone else—” Ben starts.

“I wouldn’t,” I interject. Everyone turns to me, and I stumble over the responses available to me before finally shrugging. “I welcome this arrangement.”

I’m being dumb. I shouldn’t accept this. If not because of the temptation it will offer, for the reason Stoneheart arranged it.

Francesca gives me a look that says she agrees that I’m being dumb, but Stoneheart beams in a way that makes me suspicious.

How does he benefit from this?

“This is just a surprise,” I say. I’d told myself to stay away from Ben for his safety, but when given the choice, his presence is a steady support. Silas and Francesca have been friendly toward me, but they are Stoneheart’s people, not mine, not yet.

“Am I to understand that we will be open with all our information with Kalos at this time?” Silas asks tactfully. Anything Ben learns here can technically be used against the gargoyles.

Stoneheart shrugs. “Kalos has an interest in staying on his side of the territory. I hardly think we need to start keeping secrets from him. If Stella is kept safe and happy, he won’t interfere.”

“You should be careful in leaving your scent on her,” Francesca addresses Ben, her tone pragmatic, tapping her nose and turning to Stoneheart. “The Leonids will be looking for any reason to take issue with your mating, Remy. I don’t know what your plans are, but this could cause issues.”

Ben opens his mouth, but Stoneheart makes a sound of disagreement.

“Lions aren’t monogamous, Francesca,” he muses.

What the fuck?

She shrugs. “And Stella is a witch. We don’t know what expectations they’ll have for her. I’m not warning him away or anything. Far be it from me to judge.”

Silas and Francesca share a look and seem to come to the same conclusion. They’ll accept the intrusion of Ben because Stoneheart has decreed it.

I’m not quite sure what exactly he is decreeing. As of last night, he didn’t want Ben touching me. And now it almost sounds like it’s his plan. The whiplash of this gargoyle.

“I’m sure Barnes will behave.” Stoneheart’s eyes dance. “And I’m sure my wife will enjoy my generosity.”

“That depends on your motives,” I snap. The eyes of the room are on me with mixed emotions. Silas for one, looks sympathetic. I clear my throat, unused to being diplomatic. “But thank you. I do feel better having Ben watch over me.”

I want to smack away Stoneheart’s smug look. I don’t know what he’s playing at, but it can’t be anything good if last night is to judge.

“Think of it as a belated wedding gift,” he purrs.

REMY

“WHAT ARE YOU PLANNING?” Silas asks after giving Ben and Stella access to our records for the Leonid territory and leading them from the room so we could start our morning meeting.

I’m on board with being open with the information we have, but I’d rather have the ability to choose what Ben hears when it comes to what we discover.

Stella had locked eyes with me before leaving, the look on her face announcing loud and clear that this is the last morning meeting she’s going to miss. I’m surprised. In all my strategy, I did not think that Stella would have an interest in being involved with the running of the territory.

I’m continually miscalculating around her. I would be more troubled by it if I didn’t have a plan to deal with that.

“I’m securing assets,” I say. Both of my seconds sit on the other side of the table. Silas is next to the projector we use for debriefing, his fingers steeple in front of him while Francesca has one leg slung across the arm of her favorite chair, defying the expectations of one wearing a suit.

They have very different personalities in how they approach problems, and it makes for the best sort of collaborations. I collect the people around me with care.

“You think that Ben Barnes will leave Kalos and give Stella his sole loyalty?” Francesca asks.

“Not in such a clean way as that,” I say. By all accounts, Kalos is practically a father to Barnes. The demon will not abandon him just to join

with Stella.

But can Kalos afford to keep Barnes in such a rarefied position if he's emotionally invested outside of his territory?

All fledglings must leave the nest one day, even if they must be kicked from it.

"You expressed concerns about him last night," Silas says.

"That was before I considered other options," I muse. There's a tension in that demon. I sense it as clearly as Stella's wish to submit. He needs release. And I'll happily give it if he does what I want. "His presence serves a purpose."

"I hope that purpose is you actually consummating your mating," Francesca says.

I focus on her, but she's unimpressed with my glare.

"She doesn't carry your scent," she says with a flourish of her hand. "Not in the way she would if you had been inside her. Any shifter who gets close enough will realize that."

I tap my nails on the table. "That's a temporary problem."

Silas leans back in his seat. "If she lets you get close enough after you left her exposed..."

"It was the most expedient way to get the Council out of our business." Regret is a bitter flavor on my tongue, but I can't quite track from what. I did what must be done. She's mine. "The terms of my mating are of no concern—"

"Incorrect," Silas interrupts at the same time as Francesca guffaws.

"The strength of your mating is what's going to make this territory stable in the long term," she says. Silas nods to the echo of what he said last night.

"I haven't lost a territory yet. We will not begin with this one." But perhaps I...suffered a misstep last night. My inability to control my reaction to Stella had me going too far. I'd needed to claim her and set the expectation of what our relationship would be, but my actions were sloppy. I'd exposed too many of my hungry parts.

I'd forgotten to play nice.

That error brought Barnes into the picture. A castigation and opportunity all at once.

“If you didn’t want your mating to matter, then you should have courted her without promises of territory grabs,” Silas adds.

I flash my fangs at them. “This subject is off the table.”

I know the mistakes I’ve made, and I will remedy them.

“For now,” Francesca says and responds to my glare. “You don’t trust in our counsel because we keep our mouths shut.”

She is correct, but I change topics. “What do you have for me?”

“A couple of Stella’s cousins are the ones who are responsible for the luggage mishap last night.” Silas turns on the projector showing two gangly young men. Identical twins. “Complicating things.”

I almost groan out loud when I see their age, nineteen. *Teenagers*.

Francesca winces. “They are adults by shifter law.”

“Barely,” I growl. “Do we know if they were directed by anyone who we can actually strike at?”

No one responds well to children being punished. It doesn’t matter if they are legal age or not.

Silas sighs. “Andrew and Caleb Leonid are the sons of Frank Leonid. Though they didn’t live with him even before he fled the territory.”

Stella’s uncle.

“Do they live with an adult?”

“Their aunt, Ariel Leonid. Who, by the way, is requesting an audience with the new lady of the territory,” Silas says.

I frown at the photo and accompanying details of the familiar blonde woman he projects on the screen. “She was the interruption.”

“For the Council?” Silas asks before rapidly typing the details into his laptop.

“I should have told you.” It’s uncharacteristic of me to gloss over such a detail as who the Council chose to be their spy. More reason to reorder my priorities when it comes to my wife.

“Stella’s aunt is who burst in on her wedding night?” Francesca asks. “That seems cold. Though, some shifters still have traditions of public consummation of political matings...”

Silas shrugs. “She is old school, but publicly she’s in support of Stella, and by extension, you, leading the territory. Our sources say that she didn’t like her brother at all.”

“So we have no reason to think she sent the boys to remove our belongings.” I bite my lip before sighing. “Bring them in.”

“Remy—” Silas starts.

“Even if it’s a prank, we will put the fear of the gods in them. They are old enough to start some real problems.”

I was only a couple of years older than they are when I took over my first territory. Not that anyone knows that.

“We won’t hurt them, but we can threaten them with exile and see if they throw anyone under the bus,” I say.

The library doors are flung open, and a lithe woman with a high ponytail waltzes in. Her dress barely covers her ass, and though she is shorter than her sister, she’s all legs.

“Good of you to join us,” Silas growls. Fiona always brings out a different side of him. One steeped in annoyance.

“Hello to you too,” Fiona says with a saccharine tone.

“I thought you’d still be out,” Francesca says.

“I wanted to debrief before catching some sleep.” Fiona throws herself into a chair, crossing her legs and sinking into the cushions.

“You’ll still be submitting a formal report of your actions,” Silas says as if he can’t help it.

“Whatever you say, Daddy.” She bats her lashes at the lizardman.

The sound of the pencil breaking in Silas’s grip has me clearing my throat to stifle my laugh. The tension between these two gets worse and worse every year and has only escalated now that Fiona is doing more work for us.

“Stop playing with your food and report,” Francesca chastises. Ignoring the thundercloud of Silas’s expression.

The teasing expression drops from Fiona’s face, and she becomes serious.

“We’ve missed something big.”



ONCE THE MEETING DISPERSES, I go looking for my wife. The revelations of what Fiona brought to the table will keep us all busy for the foreseeable

future.

It was all at once an avalanche of a discovery and not enough.

Silas and Francesca are out the door within a breath to get a jump on the intel, and Fiona slinks away to her and Francesca's rooms. The energy she'd teased Silas with is gone now that he isn't here to needle.

I don't have to look far. Stella sits in the living room, her brow furrowed in concentration while swiping through a tablet that Silas provided her. Barnes is on the other side of the long couch tapping through his own tablet. The space between them is a cautious chasm that won't do.

The game that I'd been looking forward to is heavier now. Any seductive plans I have will be delayed with this new problem, but the tension in my chest eases at the soft light hitting her from the window. Her hair and makeup are precise, but the warmth traces her delicate skin and lights up the small flyaway hairs like hot gold hinting at her inner liveliness.

Whether she is in business dress or a slouchy hoodie with her hair piled haphazardly on her head, the brimming energy shows through.

And now she's here. *Mine*.

The demon notices my presence before she does. His posture impossibly stiffens, and I stop his movement to stand with a gesture. I don't have long before I start questing for the information we need, but there are things that must be handled.

I settle on the armchair placed perpendicular to the couch.

"You seem displeased." I observe. And focused. I wouldn't be surprised if she still hadn't taken note of my presence. Perhaps having a bodyguard is the best course of action with her tendency to be sucked into tasks. I'd assumed that only applied to when she crafted charms.

"There's just—" Stella breaks off, realizing I'm the one addressing her. She jumps, and her eyes widen. Yes, a permanent bodyguard would be wise.

"There's just what?" I ask. She's looking for something in the records. Foreboding prickles over my skin.

Stella hesitates. She doesn't want to confide in me. Which is fair. I wanted to possess her, not be an ear for her problems, but this is specific to the territory.

I reach to stroke where she clutches the tablet, and she flinches at my touch. *Which is what I wanted*, I remind myself.

Her words give way in the face of my attention. “I’ve been hearing rumors about something troubling. But there’s no evidence of it in your records.” She frowns. “It must be just gossip.”

“Something like people going missing?” I ask. The coincidence is too much to ignore.

The peach of her skin pales. “It’s true?”

Barnes adjusts in his seat with a frown, reminding me that I’m exposing this to Kalos through him, but this is too important to keep under wraps.

“It’s something we just uncovered. What have you heard?” I ask.

“Just whispers.” She wets her lower lip, and I focus on her words rather than the pink curve of her mouth. “Of people vanishing. Whole families gone in a night. I have a distributor who works between the territories who mentioned it in passing a few months ago, and I shrugged it off. But the number of protective charms he sells here have risen.”

The community knows. People are afraid, and this is the first any of my people have heard of it. The territory did not expect the Leonid family to solve whatever this is. Which indicates a good deal about what sort of protection they’re used to.

“We’ve heard the same,” I bite out. “We won’t know how pervasive this is until we look into it more. Give me your distributor’s details. It’ll be a good place to start.”

Stella’s gaze is on me, expectant, but wary. “You’ll investigate?”

“It’s all-hands-on-deck for this. We take these situations seriously.” Hierarchy and politics aside, the role of a territory leader is to provide safety and peace to those who reside in their domain. It’s possible that it’s a couple of people who innocently moved away from the territory, alarming their neighbors, but for this sort of widespread fear? The less innocent options aren’t good.

“What can I do?” she asks after I put my number into her phone, and she forwards me the distributor’s information.

The question takes me off guard, and I frown, glancing at Barnes who acts like he can’t hear the discussion happening right in front of him.

“I can talk to people too,” Stella says, and it takes effort not to snarl at the thought of her walking around this territory with people disappearing and asking questions. She continues, “I should be meeting the people who reside in the territory.” She winces. “Especially the Leonids. The longer we put that off, the more wiggle room they’ll assume they have.”

She’s correct there.

“Your aunt has asked for an audience with you,” I say.

“My aunt?”

“Have you met any Leonids?”

Stella’s eyes fall to the tablet in her lap as she picks off an imaginary piece of lint from her dress. “Never in a setting where I’d be introduced. I’ve traded messages with my brother, Noah, who travels. The first time I met my father was when Kalos barbecued him.”

I shrug. “He was rather obnoxious. You didn’t miss much.”

That gets a tiny smile from her, but it doesn’t change the fact that she has a whole other side of family members who rejected her existence. Who now will be under her in status.

“I will think on what you can do,” I say. A task that isn’t her wandering around an unsecured territory. “I didn’t anticipate your cooperation in this.”

“It seems that you didn’t expect much from this marriage.” *That you didn’t expect much from me.* The sentiment would be cutting if I wasn’t already hardened to what needed to be. Softness is for others.

“I expected many things but find that you make a fool of my strategies,” I say.

She blinks like she can’t quite understand my words. Which is good. They were too honest, but we are trading truths.

There’s something else I must do.

“I’m sorry for last night,” I say.

“Which part?” she asks. She tries to cover the hurt with anger, but my actions wounded her. I can tell myself that it’s better this way, but I didn’t handle it cleanly. Even now, her presence, eager to care for the territory she never expected to lead, blurs the shape I expected her to fill here.

Barnes’s lips purse like he’d rather walk away and not hear any of this, but Stella sits still, her usual frenetic energy halted for my response.

I tilt my head. “The parts you didn’t enjoy.”

Her brows rise. "Oh, all of it?"

Vixen.

"I should have laid out what you should expect from our relationship rather than skipping to claiming you," I allow.

She enjoyed submitting to me. She may not like the memories of it because of how the rest of my actions hurt her, but she'd given over her trust guilelessly.

She won't give so freely again. I sacrificed that to keep her hopes for me low.

I could have done that better. "It was a poor way to begin a business partnership."

Stella leans back into the couch with an air of disbelief. "A business partnership where we sleep in the same bed and presumably fuck?"

"Ideally, yes. I'm told it will put people in the territory at ease."

Her eyes narrow even as her cheeks pinken. "You're only apologizing because we didn't consummate. Francesca probably told you as much since she's so concerned about the sensitive noses of shifters."

Is that a sizzle of pride in my chest? Stella is excelling in anticipating my moves already. It's inconvenient.

"You didn't consummate?" Barnes's eyes widen and face reddens when we both look at him. "I'm sorry, I'll give you privacy."

"No, stay," I say, standing. "I need to start my investigation."

I address my wife. "Accept my apology or don't. It doesn't change what we must do."

That is a bit of bluffing on my part. Stella could continue to bar me from our bed. She is the one who has a blood right to this territory. I do not.

But I think I can work this in a way that will be satisfying for both of us. At that thought, I turn to the demon currently clenching his fists in his lap. His emotions lie so close to the surface when it comes to this firefly.

"Barnes, will you stay until I return?"

"I don't answer to you," he snaps at me.

My lips twitch. He's as prickly as my wife. The challenge of breaking him will be just as sweet.

"I was clear in the email I sent that you wouldn't. It was a question, not an order."

His glare has me loosening my wings. I want to show this demon exactly how much he'd enjoy receiving orders from me, but that is something that must wait.

"Of course," he says.

I turn to go but pause to correct her.

"You assume that I don't expect much, but you're wrong. Your wishes have just been different from what I anticipated. Silas mentioned that he didn't get a chance to show you your workshop. It's the room to the right of our bedroom."

Stella's mouth opens in bewildered surprise. "Workshop?"

My smile is victorious. "Until later, wife."

STELLA

“WHAT THE FUCK IS THIS?” My voice is faint.

“It seems to be a workshop,” Ben quips beside me, bringing me back to our situation. Not that I’d ever really left.

“I can see that, but—” I break off and take the room in. This isn’t just any workshop. The room is laid out exactly like *my* workshop. The one I had at the townhouse I shared with Mom.

I’d never been able to craft much at my place of business. The sounds of traffic and the train were too hectic for me to sink into my work in the way I need to.

There *are* differences. This room has a dark and lush botanical-themed wallpaper instead of the white walls of *my* workshop, and the window is floor to ceiling with the view of sunlit skyscrapers around us instead of my mother’s garden. None of the buildings are quite as tall as this one so the sight goes on and on. A thick curtain hangs to one side, ready for me to pull it to block out the world for when I needed to go deep into the work.

The most notable difference is the sage-colored plush reading chair in the corner I’d always kept empty. Once upon a time, I meant to get a chair or sofa for that corner. I’m always falling asleep at my desk, sometimes for a short nap to recharge during my magic workings and others when I’d stay up too late to apply finishing touches to a deadline project. But I explained away the need for one because it’s not like my actual bed was that far away. I shouldn’t be napping in my workshop anyway.

The chair looks so comfy in its placement that I cast those arguments away. I should have gotten the damn chair...and now I have one.

But other than that, the similarities are striking and eerie. The bookshelf of reference books I treasure is to the side of the door with my large worktable on the far wall. The antique-looking mini drawers that sit on the tabletop make me suspicious enough to step forward. It'd taken me months of scouring flea markets to find that type of storage.

The small scuffed up gold handles on the drawers are familiar, and I run my fingers over the deep scorch mark in the center of the desk.

"This is my stuff." The revelation is a relief as much as it inspires more questions. I didn't realize how much a part of me missed the stability of having a room that is wholly mine now that I've been thrust into a world of new rules and surroundings.

I thought I'd have to leave everything behind, but *someone* made sure I wouldn't.

"Did you do this?" I ask Ben, my voice cracking, but I suspect the real answer. This is the only place I've been able to pick up the faint scent of Stoneheart.

Why did he bother?

Ben shakes his head, brow furrowing in thought as he takes in the room. "He seems to care about your comfort."

My mouth opens, but words escape me. None of the interactions I've had with Stoneheart would indicate this level of care. "He probably just got someone else to set it up. You were the one who moved the items I'd packed up at my place."

Ben tilts his head. "I did. You should have told me to bring your furniture."

I shrug. My throat is thick with an odd mix of emotions. Confusion is at the forefront, but also...gratitude.

"I didn't think about it." I was focused on the fact that I finally got my revenge. I didn't consider everything I'd leave behind. "And I didn't know what type of living situation I'd have here. I thought I may need to set up a place in my closet or something to craft charms."

My nail digs against the blackened spot of the wood, and I wonder if I open the drawers under it if they'll be full of my supplies organized how I

left them. This is something that would have had to be done before the wedding.

I sit on my work stool. “Just when I think I have him figured out, he pulls something like this.”

His apology was a manipulation. The gleam in his eyes when I called him out on it made that clear, but that doesn’t explain this.

Ben blows out a breath. “I think that the moment anyone has anything figured out about Stoneheart, he changes to counter from a better position.”

So combative, but that goes with my own assessment. Would I even benefit from getting the upper hand on Stoneheart?

I blink at Ben who settles on the reading chair. It’s been near silence between us since Stoneheart pronounced him my bodyguard. A part of me is leery of his presence. Is he someone for me to trust? Or someone Stoneheart has a use for?

“How is Katarina doing?” I ask. My friend put on a brave face before I walked down the aisle, but she hadn’t been all right. Nearly losing your mate and child will do that to a person.

Ben clears his throat. “She’s doing well. Better this morning than she’s been.”

I nod in relief, making a note to myself to reach out and check on her myself. The only thing that’s stopped me so far is that I’m drowning a little here and don’t want to pull her down with me.

There’s a silent pause, neither of us seeming to know what to say in this cluster fuck. I nearly kissed him last night, and he knows it.

I shake my head. I can’t go on with this awkwardness between us.

“I was glad you agreed to do this. But...” I trail off.

The corner of his mouth kicks up. “I go from being happy I can help you to being wary of this whole mess.”

“What do you think his game is?”

Ben doesn’t answer for a moment. Uncertainty dances over his features before he finally answers. “I’m not sure. I just know I couldn’t reject his offer.”

His lashes are thick, and his dark eyes silently ask me if he should go. Soulful. That’s what they are. Ben is here for me. That fact settles a little of the unease of this, only a little.

He's not telling me everything. It was there on his face when he was contemplating how to answer me, an ill-timed wince. I'm not the most observant witch, but Ben is hiding something.

"I guess we are playing this by ear," I breathe. Even with his secrets, I don't want to send Ben away. He's my ally even if Stoneheart teased fantastical options that seem in direct conflict to his prior rules.

I bite my lip, wondering what to do next. I thought I'd be focusing on the disappearances but that has been taken off my hands. I'm unsure how to proceed.

Do I meet with my aunt?

What else do I have left in my life now that I've accomplished the revenge I craved, other than my position in this territory?

For better or worse, I'm the lady of this territory, and that fact paired with how ill-equipped I am makes me want to vomit. And that's without adding Stoneheart or how I feel about the remaining Leonids into the mix.

Ben is suddenly next to me as if drawn by my distress.

"Hey." Ben's voice is as gentle as the hand he places on my arm. My bare arm. We both freeze, and our gazes drop to that point of contact. I don't pull away from him, and he doesn't yank his hand back. Instead, his thumb moves in circles on the inner crease of my elbow. The sensual tickle contradicts his warm comfort.

"We'll figure this out," he says, the words a crooned promise.

"Everything. The territory. Stoneheart. The Leonids. We've got this. I'll be with you every step of the way."

If Stoneheart doesn't rip his hands off now that he's undoubtedly rubbed his scent into my skin.

That detail is something I can solve.

I blow out a breath. "Thank you."

Ben pulls away with a nod. His support postpones my panic for later. Now—now I have something to work on.

My soldering gun is exactly where I expect it to be.

BEN

I SHOULD HAVE TOLD HER.

But what exactly should I have said? That I may not know what Stoneheart is planning but when he threatened me last night it was with the care of a lover? A seducer. That only begs more questions, and I could have been mistaken.

I should have said *something*, anything to dispel this tightness in my throat.

I'm back in the reading chair watching Stella work. It's all I can do to keep from blabbing things I don't understand.

I'm here to be helpful, not to add more confusion.

It would be a distraction to whatever charm she's crafting, and the sight of her intense focus is too captivating to risk saying anything.

I stay silent in the quagmire of my feelings and focus on being busy to keep from staring at the witch I've only ever seen chaos from funnel it into magic. I check off various tasks for Kalos I can perform remotely while I run searches in our territory for the same type of disappearances that are plaguing the Leonid territory.

Nothing. The relief is short lived. The stark differences between the two territories mean that something has been rotting the underbelly of the territory that Stella has so readily claimed ownership of.

I reach out to various contacts that live between the two territories with carefully worded inquiries. With each reply it becomes clear that

though there's no proof, people are suspicious. Tempers are short, leading to more altercations.

I make notes and send them to Silas, hoping he can discern anything from the clusters of altercations. His role is the most similar to the one I hold at Kalos's side, and he'll benefit from the research the most.

I don't dare contact Stoneheart. He...intimidates me. Before the other night, I'd message him directly with no issue, but now—I'm not ready to expose myself to him. Not with the shameful way I reacted to his touch.

Not with the temptation that is his bride.

I message back and forth with Silas. The lizardman expresses gratitude, asking me to process various reports and add them to their records.

The actions are comforting in their familiarity, and the hours pass quickly until there's a quiet tap at the door to the workshop.

"Lunch is ready." A short blonde woman ducks her head in subservience and curtsies quickly before departing as soon as I open the door.

Stella doesn't respond to the interruption. I hesitate before placing my hand lightly on her back. She jumps.

"Sorry," I say quickly.

"It's okay." She blinks like I've woken her up. It takes a moment for her eyes to focus on me.

I rub the fabric of her dress, trying to soothe the worst of her surprise. "Lunch is ready."

"Already?" she asks, but her growling stomach has her cheeks pinkening. "I guess it's been a while since I started."

She pushes away from the oddly shaped pieces of metal she's been working on. There's a scattering of blue gems and chips of porcelain surrounding the mix of silver and gold in front of her. The light hits them, and I want to ask her about her work but take a large step back.

Witches don't share their craft with outsiders. I don't want to find out if that's what I still am to her.

We make our way to the kitchen in silence, mine watchful and Stella's as if she's still stuck on the task she left on her desk.

The woman who informed me of lunch is gone, but there's a different woman sitting at the counter and devouring the sandwich placed in front of

her. Two other sandwiches sit on the counter presumably for us.

“Hello,” Stella greets the woman, her voice sounds like she forces the words out.

“You must be Stella! I’m Fiona.” Fiona is dressed in loungewear with a messy bun on the top of her head. Dark makeup is smudged under her eyes.

Stella relaxes. “Francesca mentioned you. This is Ben—”

“Oh, I’ve heard all about Mr. Ben,” Fiona winks at me, and Stella stiffens. Fiona’s eyes widen, and she backpedals with hand motions, including the sandwich. “I didn’t mean anything by that I swear! I just think it’s nice for someone else to cause gossip around here other than me.”

“Gossip?” My voice is faint.

Fiona shrugs, dipping her sandwich into the au jus sauce. “You’re spending all day, every day with the lady of the territory. Of course there’s going to be gossip. Pepper could hardly wait to set eyes on you.”

“Pepper?” I ask as my face heats.

“She’s the cook, or maybe she prefers chef. She runs a restaurant in the building and delivers lunch and dinner here. She’s a Leonid, and we’re pretending she isn’t giving intel to the rest of her family.” Fiona imparts the information like it’s as obvious as the weather.

I look around for Pepper.

“She already left,” Fiona confirms. “Probably brimming with the knowledge that you’ve both been secluded behind a closed door *all* day long.”

The muscles in my jaw tighten.

“I don’t think I like Pepper,” Stella mutters.

Fiona grins. “Don’t take it personally. She’s all right, and the food is good. I think the gossip will be rather minor, as long as Stoneheart doesn’t take issue. Which, like, duh, he set up the situation. He’d be a grade A asshole if he complained about people talking.” She chews for a bit and swallows. “Not that he doesn’t have his asshole-ish moments.”

Stella snorts. “I can’t tell if you’re trying to pull me into shit-talking my husband the first day of marriage to judge me, or if you’re being honest.”

“I do like to start trouble,” Fiona wipes her mouth. “But I owe my loyalty to Stoneheart. He saved me and Francesca when no one else would, but that doesn’t mean that he’s always Mr. Sunshine. He knows he’s an asshole. I think he gets off on it.”

Stella hums. “I won’t say it.”

Fiona laughs. “You don’t have to. I don’t think anyone expects you to like him yet, but he’ll grow on you.”

I frown at the sandwich in front of me. *That’s what I’m afraid of.*

But for the life of me I don’t know if I’m more worried about him growing on Stella...or me.

STELLA

IT'S long after the sun has set, and the surrounding city lights come alive like glitter in a black sea when I push away from the charm I'm working on and stretch.

Ben's gaze is like a touch. It's not the gentle reminder to come back to the real world to tell me it was lunch and then the same for dinner, but it feels forbidden still.

Dinner had been just the two of us, Fiona must have been busy working for Stoneheart, and it's hard not to feel a little jealous of the fact that her purpose is so clearly defined compared to mine.

Stoneheart has not gotten back to me with how I can help.

The ringing silence of the meal was a reminder of my new aimlessness. Freedom from tasks isn't real freedom, and the constriction of this life is starting to feel like a rope around my chest that tugs tighter with every echo of forks against our plates.

It's only been a day, but if I focus on the sensation, I'll be begging to leave the penthouse within minutes.

And that means facing the Leonids. The extended family who are waiting with bated breath for me to mess up. The same people who cast my mother aside.

Lions may not be monogamous, but there is certainly a double standard, since infidelity was the explanation Lorenzo Leonid used to disown me.

There is no denying I'm a Leonid, I passed that blood test to enter the spelled compound when I involved myself in this mess. Lorenzo can't be the only guilty party, and a good portion of me is still angry about what happened. The unfairness of it if not for the rejection alone.

If I'm going to socialize with them, I have to get over that.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow I'll leave the penthouse and face the nameless cronies who allowed my mother to be abandoned with a newborn. I don't think I can be cooped up any longer.

The bracelet that I've been working on lays in disjointed pieces, but I'm past the point of the patience I'd need to troubleshoot it more tonight.

"It looks like you made good progress," Ben says, ignorant of my thoughts. The comment is a safe one to make since I started on this charm from scratch. I've already tried a few gem combinations, but it's missing something.

I sigh. "It's not working quite right, but I'll solve it tomorrow. I have an idea of what to try."

He doesn't ask what the charm is for, which is fortunate because I'm not quite ready to tell him.

The creation of it is still too close to my heart and the possibilities of what it will allow too far reaching. I have a gargoyle to speak to and a territory to consider...

My yawn is sudden and cracking. I have no idea what time it is, but I need to sleep after the amount of magic I wove into the metal today.

"I'm going to start getting ready for bed," I say. "I don't know what Stoneheart expects you to do—"

"I should stay close if not have my eye on you."

I raise my brows. "Well, you can wait in our room while I shower then."

Hopefully removing his scent from my skin.

I'm too sleepy to tease Ben about his blush. It's the first sign of his feelings since he'd touched my arm to reassure me earlier. Since then, he's kept to himself. Which is good... being cautious is good.

I rush through the shower. The echo of the bathroom and curling quiet of the day is starting to get to me now that I'm not distracted by my work. Before I'm mentally ready, I'm back in the generic bedroom in a modest but thin sleep set.

Ben lounges in the corner where a pair of sitting chairs angle toward each other. His hands are interlaced in front of him, his tablet missing for once. The lamp next to the chair is the only light in the room, and its warmth illuminates the coffee table with a fake fruit center piece in front of him.

Why keep this room so bland?

The setup is worlds away from my new workshop that has every detail keyed to me.

“Are you just going to stay there all night?” I ask. The gaping emptiness that comes from pouring too much magic into a charm has my body yearning for a cuddle it sure as hell isn’t going to get.

But once that charm is finished... I shake myself from that line of thought. Just because Stoneheart made some vague comments doesn’t mean he’s suddenly gotten over his jealousy. The charm will just be a fail-safe.

If nothing else, it was a fantastic distraction today. A way to accustom my witch senses to my new space and life.

“Stoneheart asked me to,” he says with a shrug as his eyes travel down the thin fabric of my sleep shorts and loose tee. “The penthouse has protections on it, but that doesn’t stop the people allowed to come and go.”

My nipples take notice of the stroke of his gaze, but I ignore them.

“Like the gossipy Pepper?” I ask. The young Leonid woman hadn’t made eye contact with me before scurrying out the door after setting our dinner plates down. “His expectation is silly. You need to sleep sometime.”

Ben snorts. “I’ll message him before it becomes a problem. You should get some rest.”

I yawn, my body agrees with him. “Watching me sleep is creepy.”

“Only if I enjoy it too much.” The corner of his mouth kicks up.

I blink not expecting the quick reply.

“Well—uh—” I struggle. “Don’t enjoy it too much then.”

What does that even mean?

Before I have a chance to obsess over my awkwardness, the balcony doors shake. The sprawling nerves that have threatened to distract me all day pull tight. The door unlatches as slowly as a horror movie, and Stoneheart steps in.

Unlike the other times I've seen him enter a space, his larger-than-life aura is dim tonight. One wing isn't clasped at his shoulder and is instead extended in a hang. And is he limping?

"Ah, you're still awake." He doesn't sound thrilled by that. His normally growly voice sounds less intense than just this morning.

Fuck. He seems tired. A portion of his skin that isn't tattooed is darker on his chest, but it's hard to see in the lamplight. I hit the overhead lights, and my sleepiness evaporates.

Ben hisses in dismay, jumping to his feet.

"What the fuck happened to you?" I ask. Dried blood clings to his skin in the shape of jagged edges.

"Nothing to be concerned about. Just a little fighting." His tone is cavalier and doesn't reach me in my rush.

I find the first aid kit I stumbled upon when I was putting away my toiletries this morning. I'd been curious why the kit was so large but had written it off as someone being over-prepared. As I bring it to Stoneheart, he sits heavily on the end of the bed.

"I just said it's fine." But his growl lacks any real fire. The marks on his chest start to make sense in my brain. They're from claws.

He narrows his eyes at where I'm frozen with the kit. My stomach turns at the sight of blood. One of the lower cuts beads with fresh red.

"Have you ever patched anyone up?"

"...No." I hand the first aid kit to Ben who snorts but opens the kit with practiced competency. Of course, Ben knows first aid. He removes some gauze and douses it with alcohol.

"They'll be fine by morning," Stoneheart says, inching away from Ben.

"Don't be a baby. I doubt you want your skin healing over any pieces of someone else's claws," Ben mutters and presses the astringent smelling pad against the claw marks. Stoneheart makes a snarly sound but cuts it off with a glare at Ben. There's some sort of tension between them, and Ben gentles in his task with a swallow. "Stella, hand me the saline. I'll flush the wounds out."

I do as he asks and observe the unusual way Stoneheart is holding himself. I peer around his back and gasp at the double set of deep scratches on one of his wings.

"I thought gargoyles could heal by stone-sleeping," Ben says.

“That would be true of most gargoyles. I’m not full-blooded. I’ve always suspected that if I were to stone sleep, I’d never wake up,” Stoneheart says with his eyes closed and head tilted back as if he wants the both of us to disappear and leave him in his current state.

“Who did this?” I ask, like he hadn’t just shared something very personal and troubling.

Stoneheart cracks an eye open and arches his brow at me. “Are you going to defend my honor?”

“Yes.” I frown. “If it was a Leonid—”

“Stella.” Stoneheart focuses his full attention on me, and his cajoling almost sounds warm. The tone shift distracts me enough that I don’t comprehend his words. “This is allowed. It’s from pit fighting.”

Until I do.

“You got injured on purpose?” I ask, not controlling my volume.

He snorts. “I won on purpose. Injuries are just the price paid for stability and to get the lay of the land.”

“Explain,” I demand.

His eyes narrow, but I don’t back down. It doesn’t matter that our marriage is political. From his own admission, we’re business partners.

That doesn’t stop me from being surprised when he speaks. “I asked anyone who wished to challenge my role in the territory—”

I suck in a breath.

“And I won. Many times,” he adds, like it makes it better.

“That was risky,” Ben says with a frown. “What if you lost?”

“If I lost, then I wouldn’t deserve to hold this territory.”

“But Stella would have been put at risk,” Ben grits out.

“Which is why you were here and would have been able to get her out. Silas was prepared to message you in case the worst happened.”

“I want to go with you the next time,” I say.

“Absolutely not,” Stoneheart responds immediately, and from Ben’s expression, he agrees. Sucks for both of them then.

“Are other women there?” I ask. “Is this a social event?”

I suspect it is. Why fight unless there’s an audience?

Stoneheart’s expression isn’t as closed off as usual, and he furrows his brows. “Yes—”

“Then I want to go and present a united front.”

“There shouldn’t need to be a next time,” Stoneheart grinds out.

“Promise me you’ll take me if there is.” I’m not going to let him slide past on a technicality.

He glares and doesn’t say anything.

“I’m either your partner in this, or I’m not,” I say. “You don’t just get to take me out of the cabinet when you need a prop.”

“*Fine*,” he hisses. “I promise.”

“Thank you.” I blink to hide away how much his capitulation means to me and clear my throat. “Is there anything I can do to help you feel more comfortable?”

“Tell your demon to finish up quickly. I don’t appreciate his nurse’s touch.” Stoneheart casts a look at Ben, but it’s not nearly as caustic as his words are.

“I’ll do my best,” Ben says drily. There’s a pause where he does seem to focus on working quickly before he speaks again. “I didn’t know you were mixed blood. No one actually has a record of your history either. Which I assume is your intention.”

“Was any of that a question?” Stoneheart asks before sighing. “It’s better for people outside of my circle to know as little about me as possible.”

Ben nods. “I won’t share your secrets. Do you want bandages or—”

“There’s skin protective film in there. Since you went through the trouble to flush the wounds out.”

Ben finishes his work in no time. Knowing that the wounds will be healed by morning helps, but *pit fighting*?

Quicker than I’d expect for him to move, Stoneheart grabs Ben’s wrist before he pulls away and brings the demon’s hand to his face, inhaling. Ben and I both freeze as the gargoyle breathes him in.

The act is intimate and sparks something curious in my belly.

“You’ve been touching my wife, Barnes,” Stoneheart’s pupils expand as he speaks against Ben’s skin.

My cheeks burn even as my heart sinks, but instead of threatening, the statement sounds like a purr.

“I’m surprised you can scent anything past the disinfectant,” Ben says instead of rushing to deny the claim.

“Her scent is one that I’m attuned to.”

That surprises me, but it shouldn't. I am his claimed mate. I may be numb to the physical nature of it because I'm a witch, but he apparently isn't.

The silence is tense as they stare at each other. There's a playful light in Stoneheart's eyes, but Ben's stillness is full of trepidation.

Ben breaks the standoff. "Then, if Stella doesn't object, you'll have to add it to my tab because you're not doing anything about it tonight."

My mouth falls open. *Object to what?*

"You should rest," Ben continues as he steps away from Stoneheart. There's a shake under his professional tone, but his face remains placid. The gargoyle releases him. "If that's everything, I'll come back in the morning."

Stoneheart considers him for a moment before giving his permission with a nod.

Ben looks to me and freezes. He hesitates like he doesn't want to leave me alone here.

But I'm not afraid of Stoneheart. Maybe it's the mating bite or the meticulous workshop he set up for me, but I can handle what he dishes out. My curiosity won't allow me to leave the way Ben is anyway.

"See you in the morning," I say.

"Barnes," Stoneheart says right before the demon vanishes. Ben stills. His eyes on the injured gargoyle like he's a cobra about to strike. "Thank you for watching over Stella. Her safety and happiness are a priority to me."

They have another silent conversation that leaves me feeling like an uncomfortable third wheel, but Ben speaks up before I can voice my questions.

"Of course," Ben says and disappears.

I turn on Stoneheart. "What was that?"

"I thanked him." He rolls his shoulders with a wince.

"No, not that," I say. There's *something* between the two of them.

"What are you planning? What tab? What would I object to?"

Stoneheart tilts his head. "Don't you enjoy his presence?"

"Husband." The term is husky without my meaning it to be. "Don't try and distract me."

He must be very tired because he actually responds when I use the title, his eyes slit in pleasure.

His actions are so contrary to our wedding night that I don't quite know how to interpret them. Which are his real feelings about me? Am I a pawn or a prize?

The pleased look morphs into a frown as if he's frustrated that he reacted in such a way, but he goes back to a poker face before he answers me. "Barnes has a very unique skill. If he were to eventually to come and work for us, that would be advantageous."

Now I'm frowning. "Ben will never leave Kalos."

Stoneheart shrugs. "That doesn't mean I won't try and give him a reason to."

"And you want to what?" I ask, my disbelief on full display. "Use my pussy as bait? Just last night you didn't want me to touch him—"

"It wouldn't be just you drawing him in," he interjects coolly.

There's a thud in my stomach. Like the world has just been turned on its head. Little details I've gathered align. The changes in the edginess between them. Ben's secret.

"You want him?" I croak out. The possibility may have crossed my mind with how he just scented him, but with his earlier jealousy, I'd dismissed it.

"Is that something that you'd be opposed to?" Stoneheart asks like he'd never considered that possibility.

My husband wants the same demon I do.

And that means...

"You don't want me?" My heart *aches*. He may be an asshole, but I'm his mate. Something that I upended my entire life to become. Did he ever want me? For him to want to replace me so quickly—

Stoneheart stands and cuts through my mental spiral.

"Stella," he growls with a warning. "Stop."

"It's not like this is a love match." I force out of my tight throat. "You were clear about that last night."

"My desire for you is undeniable and always has been."

Always has been. My mouth snaps shut at his words.

Stoneheart's touch to my cheek is soft. Just this morning, I flinched away from him, but now the contact is a balm. He takes a moment to rub

soothing circles down my jaw as if he's enjoying the feel.

"I should be offended," he says. "Do you want me any less just because you want him?"

I should deny wanting Ben at all or even Stoneheart with how he's treated me, but I don't want to lie. "No. You're both different."

Stoneheart appeals to my secret needs and dark fantasies. Ben...makes me feel safe and more myself even as everything changes around me. "But I thought it was impossible. You seemed like you were ready to kill him last night."

He pulls away with a sigh and takes my hand instead. The gesture is chivalrous. "That was before I considered other options. Barnes could serve a purpose for us."

"What purpose?"

"I'm not made for a regular relationship, wife. As you've already experienced. I won't ever be your soft place to land." His words are light even as they're laden with regret, and he gently kisses the back of my hand. "But I won't deprive you of that *comfort*. It would even be fair of you to demand it."

"What changed?" I ask. "How do you go from wanting to kill a man to being okay with him fucking your wife?" For him to suddenly desire Ben.

Stoneheart leans back, considering his words before answering me. "I admit that I am a jealous beast, but I...*sense* that we could all be compatible."

Probably the same sense that informed him exactly how much I craved submission. The memory of that stings.

"If he's here with my permission and direction, it's different for me," he clarifies. "I would prefer you both to abstain from fucking without me, but I wouldn't deprive you shared moments of a less intense nature."

It all sounds so analytical, but I'm grateful for the outline.

Stoneheart continues, "If you prefer to keep our marriage the way it is, I am mated to you. I want you to be happy. I thought this was a way to best allow for it."

"We are either partners in this, or it doesn't happen?" I echo the earlier sentiment.

And Stoneheart's eyes light at that. "Exactly."

It's the three of us in bed or neither of us gets Ben.

The thought of Stoneheart's unforgiving dominance paired with Ben's defiance is searing. I want to see how this gargoyle would tempt the demon I want.

"Look into your heart, wife. Would you really deny me a taste of your demon? Do you find the possibility of having two lovers at once so offensive?" Stoneheart asks.

It's definitely not my heart that gives a pulse of heat at the idea, and he knows it. His nostrils flare and his lids lower in pleasure as if he can scent my reaction to the picture he's laying out.

If this is just physical for him...if Stoneheart only wants to seduce Ben to have access to his abilities—which would never happen. Ben won't leave Kalos...

"What's in this for Ben?" I ask. It's high-handed of us to be discussing this without him here to interject.

Stoneheart's expression turns sly. "I've already laid the crumbs to lead him in, and he's proven willing. I warned him that if he touched you that there would be a price to pay. He knows he's playing with fire."

"Why would he want this?"

My husband's smile takes my breath away. The pure sex and sure dominance that had him sucking me into his gravity before is on display as he brings my inner wrist up to his face and licks it. The wet stroke reminds me how it felt between my thighs.

I need to think about all of this and just how Stoneheart really benefits from this before I allow myself to buy into this, let alone involve Ben. But *fuuuuck* this gargoyle knows how to get me wet.

Stoneheart rumbles in what sounds like bliss. "Because a taste of you would be well worth a fall."

"You don't believe that," I say breathlessly.

His pale eyes focus on me, and it's as if he would say more, but instead he bows his head and lets my arm drop.

"Take your time to consider it. I need to sleep and so do you."

The pang of disappointment is silly. The guy is as scratched up as a cat toy. Nothing of that nature is going to happen tonight. Now if Ben were still here...

Fuck, I'm considering this.

I clear my throat and glance at the giant bed. "And we're sharing?"

A laugh bubbles in my chest, we're considering sharing much more than a bed, but I suppress the sensation.

"I won't force you to." Stoneheart moves to the side of the bed I've already claimed. Annoying gargoyle thinking sleep is going to be an option now that he's dropped the details of his plans on me.

He keeps talking as he climbs under the covers with a wince. "But it will be better if our scents mingle, especially if you visit with any Leonids tomorrow."

With too many things to consider, I turn off the lights of the room and climb into the opposite side of the bed. His breathing evens out immediately like someone who has no issue falling asleep.

As if I needed another reason to dislike my husband.

REMY

I GLARE into the interrogation room. The teenagers on the other side of the glass match their photos and are identical to each other, but their bearings are completely different.

“They don’t seem too disturbed to have been held overnight,” I say.

The first twin, Caleb Leonid, has been full of mirth and jokes, balancing his chair on the back two legs as he whispers to his brother.

Andrew Leonid’s face doesn’t crack a single smile. He’s dour in his seriousness. I’d place him as being the strategist of the two, but with how tight his shoulders are with frustration, I doubt the plan of stealing our luggage was his.

Silas hums next to me. “It’s as if your regular strategies are ineffective for people who have already faced certain hardships.”

I grit my teeth. Silas disparaged the pit fighting last night before I even stepped into the ring.

“I was merely covering our bases,” I say. For most groups, showing strength and might as a new leader provides the security their instincts seek. But not with this territory.

“You were blowing off steam.”

He’s not wrong. It’s frustrating to speak and try to secure the safety of the people here, only to be met with fear and suspicion. The investigation yesterday had not born useful fruit. Today, a select number of guards will continue to interview people to try and get a count of how many have disappeared and when it started.

People may be more willing to speak to them, or even Fiona, rather than me. I usually appreciate my reputation, but it's working against us here.

The pit fighting wasn't completely useless. I was patched up by the demon I'm wanting to lure in *and* was able to get metaphorically close enough to Stella to invite her to play without resorting to her hate from our wedding night.

Perhaps I should get injured more often. That impulse has me suppressing thoughts about the two of them. This seduction is a game that serves a purpose, not something to cause distractions.

I nod toward the glass. "We'll start with them together and then separate, if need be, but I don't think we'll glean much."

"I'm leaning toward this being just a prank." Silas sounds tired. "It fits with the clownish one's behavior."

But not his brother's.

We're in the basement of the Firefly where we've installed a few holding cells and rooms like this one. In other territories, we'd utilize a section of the local police precincts for such needs, but Lorenzo Leonid has never involved humans in his affairs. Only time will tell if we make arrangements with the humans of this territory who know about our existence, but until then, we will be as independent as he was.

I refuse to make use of the compound he set up outside the city even if it would have saved on the cost of installation. The place had served as a home for the Leonid family and a security center, spelled to only allow those in of Leonid descent and those invited.

It had emptied out shortly after his death. I assume the walls there hold secrets that no one wants to remember.

I make a mental note to diffuse the magic at the location and find a different use for the building, but it's hardly a priority right now.

Both boys look up when we enter.

"Looks like we've caught the eye of the devil." The jokester of the two, Caleb, elbows his brother.

"Shut up," Andrew mutters. The hard glint in his eyes doesn't waver. "You know what we did already. What else do you need?"

"I'd like to know why." I sit across the table from them as Silas stands next to the door with the guard.

“Do we need a reason? It was a stupid prank,” Andrew says.
Caleb’s grin is wide. “Not that stupid. You had really good security.”
Andrew rolls his eyes.

I imagine he’s always been pulling his brother out of trouble.

“I’m tempted to exile the both of you and call it a day.” I shrug.

“Keeping troublemakers, even young ones, is a drain on our resources.”

Caleb’s chair legs come down with a clatter, and his eyes widen in alarm, but Andrew’s shoulders only tighten in on himself.

“That’s hardly a fair judgment from someone with your reputation,” the serious twin says. “Exiling two harmless boys seems like something that will sway the people of the territory in a bad way for you.”

Both of them are pale even with Andrew’s sure-sounding reasoning.

“I have bigger concerns to deal with than the *feelings* of the people in the territory,” I say. Which is both true and untrue. There are whole families who have vanished. At least five that we’ve been able to discover so far. I don’t want to be dealing with pranksters.

But how people *feel* about their security is as large concern.

The boys share a look, and intuition scratches suspicions free. They know *something*.

I make a gesture and the guard comes forward. “Silas, I think Caleb may have some other things he’d like to fess up to while I speak with this one.”

“But—” Caleb doesn’t finish his objection as the guard leads him and Silas from the room. They’ll be in the room next to us, but it’s soundproofed enough that it won’t matter. I don’t think this will take long either way.

Andrew swallows. He’s smart and obviously cares for his brother. He’ll tell me whatever secrets are on the tip of his tongue because he has something he values to protect.

“I want assurances,” he says without pause. He was waiting for this moment.

I frown. “What type of assurances?”

“No punishment for my brother and me. It was a stupid mistake.” His caustic words add to my certainty that he didn’t come up with the plan. It probably was just a prank his brother started, and Andrew couldn’t risk it going awry. A desperate light comes into his eyes with his next request.

“And I want your promise that our sister has your protection. She’s only six.”

Fuck. These people think I’m going to go after children.

What the hell were you up to, Lorenzo? If Kalos hadn’t already eaten him, I’d be planning on a painful assassination.

“And you think what you know is enough to grant all that?” I try and keep my disgust from my face. They should be confident that their leader would at the very least keep children safe without having to secure it with intel, but I won’t turn down information.

“I’m pretty sure Frank is in the fae realm.”

My blink is long. *Fae.* That’s a hell of a complication, but one we were leaning toward. If our missing persons are being trafficked, the fae are the most likely suspects. Or at least, them ending up with the fae is.

“What makes you think that? And why should I believe that you’d give me information that would betray your own father?” I ask.

Andrew practically spits. “Let’s just say we don’t see eye to eye. He’d go there for business trips all the time, bringing Leo with him for Lorenzo. It wasn’t a secret.”

My blood beats as cold as the stone my father’s people become.

“Why would Lorenzo be dealing with the fae?” There are many legitimate reasons to trade with the fae. Magical artifacts and raw materials make for good economic opportunities.

There’s also drugs and weapons untraceable by witch magic.

Trade with the fae is regulated for a good reason.

Only recently has their ruling body started the arduous process of creating laws to protect sentient beings from barbaric practices such as being eaten or harvested for spell parts. Indentured servitude will probably remain legal for the rest of my life span with how slow they enact change.

Andrew’s eyes shift to the mirror behind me, but he keeps talking, as if the truth has been clawing to escape. “Uncle Lorenzo had a lot of bad habits. Gambling was the worst. I’d be surprised if there was any money left in the Leonid coffers.”

No need for him to be surprised. We’d assumed that Frank and Leo had somehow figured out a way to squirrel away the territory’s funding, but Lorenzo being that much in debt would explain the desperation that led to his end.

“Do you know who he was associated with?” I ask.

Andrew shakes his head, and I shrug, that would have been too easy.

I lean back in my chair. “Is there anything else?”

Andrew looks lost for a moment. “Isn’t that enough?”

It’s plenty. “You should have secured my promise before you started talking.”

His face whitens, the fear that he had been suppressing breaking through for a moment. He’s so young, and even if he’s seen troubling things, he doesn’t have the experience to be brokering such a deal, as shown by his slip up.

“I will do all you’ve requested on one condition,” I say, not leaving him in suspense for a moment longer. “You come work for me.”

The whiplash in his expression from relief to confusion is quick, “Why would you want me to work for you?”

Because children who cause problems need to be given more responsibility, and he has traits I want working for the good of this territory. His brother may be as smart, but he’s missing the concern Andrew displays and is more of a risk to take on. We’ll keep an eye on Caleb, but I would predict the close call he had may be enough to have him turn his troublemaking ways elsewhere.

“Are you rejecting the request?” I make a gesture as if to call forward the imaginary guard behind the mirror, but it’s enough for Andrew to forget his question.

“No! I’ll do what you ask.”

“Good. Welcome to the team.” I flash my fangs and Andrew flinches.

And now to discover what other secrets Lorenzo left behind.

BEN

“ARE you sure you’re okay with this?” I ask.

“Of course I’m okay. This is part of my job.” But Stella frowns. Her eyes scan the rest of the patrons of the restaurant who are working very hard at seeming like they are ignoring her presence. I would have asked for more security help when she requested for me to set up this meeting, but we are still in the Firefly which has general security positioned at the front doors.

The restaurant is off to the side of the lobby and continues the copper and black design aesthetic that I’m sure is the reason for the building’s name.

“Certainly. I’m sure you always showed up for work twenty minutes early,” I prod. She’s been distracted all morning, and I don’t know if it’s from something she learned during the morning meeting I wasn’t invited to or from last night.

I swallow at the memory of Stoneheart scenting me with his knowing smirk.

“You seem unsettled.” I know I am. My thoughts and suspicions of what the gargoyle is planning caused me to toss and turn in bed. The dreams they inspired were...complicated and not something I can think about around a bunch of shifters who may pick up how my body would respond.

If it was only Stoneheart’s appearance or confidence, it would be easy to ignore my reaction, but the dark undercurrent when he speaks to me, the

danger of him, forces my survival instincts to take notice. There's always the possibility that if I don't give him the attention he's seeking, that he'd take me by the throat and force the issue...and a traitorous part of my soul wants that.

Which is an unforgivable distraction.

I focus on the present. Stella is why I'm here, and she relies on me. If I can't perform my function of caring for her, we'll be separated, and that's very quickly becoming an unacceptable option.

Even as it is an inevitable one.

Stella sighs. "I don't know what to expect from my aunt."

That douses my cycling worries about last night. Before I let myself get embarrassed, I get to work. "Oh, of course. I can help with that."

I pull up the information I have on Ariel Leonid and skim it quickly. "Well, she's fifty-four and runs various nonprofits in the territory. No children or mate. She publicly supports your reign of the territory."

I'm aware of how little I'm offering her, and I curse my distraction. I should have done a full write-up before this, but Stella only asked me to set up this meeting this morning.

Stella nods. "I guess that's all good to know. Thank you."

"Those aren't the details you're looking for," I say, and her smile is soft but appreciative. Ariel Leonid was around when Stella's mother, Elena Elderflower, was thrown from this territory in disgrace. Did she have a hand in the events?

"Thanks for looking, though," she says. "I think I'm just going to have to meet her to answer what I really want to know."

She continues to fidget and cast me looks out of the corner of her eye as if looking for a change in topic while we wait.

"Is that all you're worried about?" I ask.

"We can't necessarily speak about certain tabs a demon does or doesn't have at the moment." Her cheeks are a pretty pink when she lowers her voice.

Ah. So last night is on her mind. My cheeks burn. "That's a shame because I'm dying to hear your input on the topic."

Stella turns to me, and her lips part. She wants to talk about it. I cast my gaze around again. The booth we were given would be well within the

realm of privacy if it were surrounded by humans, but for shifters, not so much.

I keep my words careful. "If there's some way to clear the air so you can focus on your meeting, it may make it easier for you."

And I'm definitely not advising that so I can get more answers.

"He expressed interest." Her eyes rest on me. *Interest in me.*

My mouth dries and brows lift. "I thought maybe I was misreading things."

"He wants your abilities for the territory."

I bark a laugh in relief. *Oh.* "Of course he does."

Suddenly, the concerns that twined around me since parting Stella and Stoneheart last night loosen. My next breath is a full one. He wants me in a professional sense and thinks that sex is the way to accomplish that. Gods, if he actually were pursuing me because of an interest in *me* as a person, that would be more threatening.

Stella's brows crease in concern, and I pat her thigh under the table, pulling away before I give into the desire to grip it.

"It's okay," I say. "This isn't the first time that someone has tried to tempt me away from Kalos, and it won't be the last."

This isn't even the first time someone has tried to use sex to this end. No matter how beautiful or enticing the people were, I've never been tempted to dally. No one has the pull on me that Stella does...or even the dark current Stoneheart provides.

Her mouth snaps shut, and the fire of jealousy on her face sends a zing down my spine. I like her jealous.

Stella smooths the tablecloth. "You'd also be welcome to *comfort* me."

That's a sucker punch.

"How?" I ask, my mouth already watering at the thought of what types of comfort I'd be giving Stella. I'm too hungry for this witch.

She glares at me. I suppose that's a hard question to answer in public.

"My husband and I have *shared* interests," she answers primly. I try not to wince at his title, but my reaction is stemmed when the meaning becomes clear.

Stoneheart is willing to share this vibrant witch at my side. *He's a fool.*

But he's not. He's too exacting for this to be a casual strategy, which makes this something to be wary of. But unless I'm misreading our code

talking, I'd get to be with Stella.

I'd just have to deal with the Devil.

Even if I weren't intrigued by the gargoyle, that offer would be difficult to turn down. I'm aware of the risks. Remy Stoneheart will make it difficult to reject an offer of employment when he plays his hand. He won't hurt Stella, that's not his style. But he's trying to entangle me with his territory and is an underhanded bastard.

Even knowing that, doesn't make the idea of having the permission to touch Stella less tempting.

I'm getting ahead of myself.

"And how do you feel about that?" I ask, trying to keep my face unaffected by our conversation. She could very well hate the idea. She'd just been jealous of my mention of people going after me for my abilities.

But Stella's flush darkens, and she bites her lip in a way that has my body responding, shifters surrounding us be damned. *She wants me.*

"Sorry if I'm late."

We both snap to attention as a woman in a powder blue pantsuit and a blonde bob takes a seat across from Stella.

I think the surprise in the air is from us being interrupted until Stella's face morphs into anger.

"You!" she cries.

STELLA

“Ah, I see that you recognize me.” The woman I’d last seen while I was naked and covered in the ejaculate of a certain unscrupulous gargoyle bows her head. “Of course, I’d like to apologize for our previous meeting.”

When Stoneheart mentioned Ariel wanted an audience with me, he hadn’t warned me that she was the one who interrupted us. The sting of that adds to my already flourishing anger.

“Fuck you,” I spit, and the gasps from other tables bring me back to where I am. I’m surrounded by shifters who are watching this unfold like reality television. I try to reel myself in, but the humiliation of that moment is fresh.

Ben’s eyes are wide, but Ariel Leonid, my aunt and Council spy, doesn’t take offense, instead her smile is soft.

“I’m glad to see you have such fire. Have you ordered? Pepper really has the best appetizers.” Her calmness aggravates me even as I’m still trying to breathe. I want to leave.

“I find I’m without an appetite,” I grit out as I move to push Ben out of the booth so I can get out of here without incident.

I don’t think of myself as a violent person, but I was already struggling with this meeting, knowing I’d be conversing with someone who could have been involved in my mother’s exile before Ariel’s own slight toward me became known.

“That’s a shame. I was hoping we could set up a weekly date here.” Her tone is polite, face expressionless.

The audacity of this woman has me freezing. “Excuse me?”

Ariel sighs and sets the menu down. The waiter approaches, but she waves him away. “Stella, please understand that if I wasn’t the one who reported your claiming to the Council, they would have resorted to different tactics that would have left us more vulnerable.”

“Us?” I ask, my eyes narrowing.

“The territory. I don’t expect you to like me, but I care about the well-being of our people.”

The reminder of those who are suddenly relying on me is a slap, but I’m not ready to cede any ground to this woman.

“Is that why my mother was thrown out?”

Ariel doesn’t react to that how I’d expect. “How is Elena?”

“Keep her name out of your mouth.” Fuck, I need to leave before I cause worse gossip than what will already exist. I thought I could be calm about this, refined, but the anger that was supposed to vanish when I accomplished my revenge is just below the surface, ready for a new target.

Ariel clears her throat and sadness flickers over her face. “I see that this will not be the meeting I hoped for.”

“And what did you hope for?” Ben asks. There’s an undercurrent of something forbidding in his tone that reassures me. He’ll stand by whatever I decide.

The woman’s eyes are sad but determined. “I wanted to meet my niece and to confide in the lady of the territory.”

Shame threatens to suffocate me. I have responsibilities that demand I suppress the anger that has picked up to fury in my chest, but I don’t know how to put my personal feelings aside. As if sensing my need, Ben takes my hand below the tablecloth.

The steady pulse of his palm against mine has me closing my eyes, my breathing starts out shaky but soon calms now that the eyes of the people surrounding us are hidden from my sight.

“What did you want to confide?” I ask.

Ariel is a little older than my mother, but when she leans back into the booth cushions the lines of her face deepen with weariness. “There are things that you don’t know about the history of this territory. I wish to help you.”

My personal affront dims. “Because you care about the people here?”

“I would not have risked alienating my niece otherwise.” Her brows furrow in sincerity. “There were whispers that if your wedding were a sham, a portion of the Council would petition it be disbanded and the territory restored to others who were closer to my brother. Like Frank,” she spits. “I couldn’t risk that.”

“You could have lied,” Ben says. “Said you interrupted—”

Ariel tuts. “Not without witnesses attesting that I saw what I did.”

“And if you hadn’t seen what you did. What would you have done then?” I ask.

Ariel takes a sip of her water, her eyes casting around the dining room. “I’m happy it didn’t come to that.”

Because she had seen that Stoneheart claimed me. Witnessed that it was done in a passionate embrace.

And if she hadn’t, she would have lied to the Council. She’s right. I don’t especially like her right now but being loyal to the people you care about is an admirable trait.

“How do you wish to help?” I ask.

“If you would be willing, I mentioned I’d like to have a weekly meeting with you to discuss the business of the territory. The gossip, the situations, and give you my understanding and counsel.”

This could very well be a way to try and remain relevant. I don’t know how involved Ariel was with the running of the territory under my father, but it’s not too much of a stretch for her actions to be to retain influence.

But more information is better than none, even if it’s delivered on biased lips.

“Should we do that meeting somewhere more...private?” I ask. I can’t believe I’m agreeing to this, but I wish to be an asset to Stoneheart. As I told Ben, this is my job now, and I want to be good at it.

Ariel raises an amused brow.

“Shifters make up the majority of the magical population in this territory. We have no boundaries and are incredibly nosey. Secrets don’t stay that way for long.” Her eyes glance over to Ben for a moment with meaning before continuing, “But if you would prefer meeting somewhere private, I’m happy to accommodate.”

“Do you have any current concerns you’d like me to consider?” I ask. The missing families come to mind. Silas had detailed the dead ends they

were facing in trying to get solid numbers on who is missing in the morning meeting. It had been grim.

“People are scared,” Ariel says. “My brother ruled this territory with blood and pain. The people fear that possibility with their new leader.”

“Stoneheart isn’t like him.” I’ve spent more time in our marriage upset with the gargoyle than not, but he has a code of conduct. The details I’ve gleaned from rumors over the years attest to that.

“He’s not one of us,” she says.

I scoff. “Neither am I.”

“That’s not true. Everyone has always known that you are a Leonid. Your scent identifies you as family.”

I’m momentarily speechless. “Then why—”

“There was no protecting you from Lorenzo when he decided he didn’t want you. If it wasn’t because you were a witch, it would have been something else. The safest thing for you was to be out of sight and out of mind.” Ariel clears her throat. “Either way, dominance fights are not the way to win over the populace.”

Ah, the pit fighting.

“Stoneheart has won over more territories than the either of us. He knows what he’s doing,” I say.

“But he hasn’t won over this one. The people need a reason to hope. They see you as that hope. The rightful heir returned after years of suffering under Lorenzo.”

My eyes widen. *No pressure, Stella.*

Ariel continues, “And the best way to reassure the people would be for them to see that your relationship with Stoneheart is solid. That you have the influence to sway him away from the violence that comes with his reputation.”

I open my mouth to object. Stoneheart doesn’t need me to *gentle* him, but Ariel goes on, not meeting my eyes. “They need to be able to scent you on each other.”

My mouth snaps shut, and my cheeks burn. So, everyone knows that I haven’t fucked my husband. Great.

“And that would solve everything?” My disbelief is clear, but so is my frustration. “Stoneheart is out there right now making the territory a safer place, but he is struggling to do that because people won’t *speak* to him.”

Ben squeezes my hidden hand in support.

Ariel's shoulders droop. "Speaking out hasn't resulted in good things in the past. The habit of silence has been carved so deeply that verbal promises of peace will hardly help. The scent mixing will instinctually provide comfort. Your mate will find people more forthcoming if they scent you on him."

I take a sip of water to allow myself time to think about that. This is what Silas mentioned and pushed for, just not in such plain terms. His recommendations were softer, like sleeping in the same bed, compared to my aunt telling us to raw dog it.

Ariel nods like she's said her piece before adding an afterthought. "The possibility of an heir would also do much for the stability of the area."

I choke on my water. "What?"

Ariel purses her lips primly. "People want to know that you're both committed here. That you're staying, and this is your home. It may be traditional advice, but it is time tested."

My eyebrows can't get any higher, but somehow, I can still speak. "I struggle to believe that me getting pregnant will help with anything."

She shrugs, as if sensing that pushing this issue will cause me to crack.

"I see that I may have startled you with these observations. I'll leave you to consider my words. Please call me if you have any questions. I would like for us to be on friendly terms."

"What the fuck?" I whisper as Ariel leaves us with a respectful nod.

The rest of the restaurant goes back to the usual volume since they're done eavesdropping. I'm too stunned to roll my eyes.

"Let's go." Ben's voice is gruffer than usual, but his touch is soft as he directs me out of the booth and restaurant. It was probably rude to use a table without ordering anything, but Stoneheart *does* own the building.

Fuck fuck fuck. My skin is cold as I'm stuck between reactions. Anger at the expectations being thrust on me, frustration that the people in the territory want so much when I've already given up everything that makes me who I am, and fear of what the Council will try if Stoneheart fails to calm the territory.

We've only just stepped into an empty elevator when Ben teleports us directly to the penthouse.

I gasp and nearly fall at the abrupt change. My stomach flips at the abrupt change in scenery and swirl of colors.

“Are you all right?” Ben’s arms come up around me. “Sorry, you usually don’t have this reaction to teleporting.”

I don’t reward his observation with a reaction. Teleporting is never comfortable, but it’s usually better if I have time to close my eyes first. I’m still stuck on some very prominent details of Ariel’s advice.

“No, I’m not all right,” I say. “Strangers want me to get pregnant.”

Ben pulls his hands away from me at the reminder. “It’s not an unheard-of strategy, if old school.”

“And is that what you’d want?” I don’t even know what I’m asking. The panic spreading through my veins attests that I’m having issues with the concept, so why even ask him?

“What I want matters very little,” he replies. “I’m only here temporarily. You and Stoneheart are the ones who will decide the best course of action.”

“I see,” I say.

His words are a slap, and I grit my teeth at the reminder that even though Ben *feels* like safety, he isn’t.

BEN

STELLA LEANS CLOSER to the charm she's crafting as if she's alone in this workshop. Her pursed lips and the sharp movements attest to her frustration.

I bite back my trepidation and send a message to the one person I don't want to.

Me: The meeting with Ariel didn't go well. Stella is upset.

Knowing that Stoneheart wants to seduce me for my abilities is a relief, but with Ariel's words, I'm warier about getting involved. My desire for Stella isn't only physical. It would be difficult to go along with what they're offering only to leave the couple to their marriage.

Stoneheart: What happened?

I'm surprised by the quick response.

Me: Apparently, Stella didn't recognize who interrupted you on your wedding night.

Stoneheart: Shit.

I huff a laugh.

Stoneheart: That's my fault. I forgot to tell her. I've been focused on the missing persons situation.

Stoneheart: Isn't there anything you can do to sweeten her mood?

I inhale roughly at the tantalizing image of that. Touching Stella, maybe kissing the length of neck exposed with how she's craning over the piece of jewelry she's creating. The glow of that skin taunts me. The white scar of Stoneheart's claiming mark halts my daydreams. The bite that

symbolizes his hold on her healed quickly. Gargoyle saliva has healing properties, not that it's a well-known fact.

Me: And increase my tab? That seems irresponsible, since I don't exactly know how I'm paying for it.

This is dangerous, but it doesn't stop me from picking up the phone again when he gives another quick reply.

Stoneheart: And you are nothing if not responsible.

Me: She's working. If I interrupt her, I'm liable to get dismembered in her current mood.

Stoneheart: You're being a coward.

In more ways than one.

Me: She's scary. I'm not a big bad gargoyle.

Stoneheart: You think I'm big?

I shake my head and don't respond, but I can't help the smile on my face at another diabolical facet of the gargoyle, a hidden playfulness. My smile fades as I realize I hadn't mentioned Ariel's advice to make an heir.

He's considered it. I explain away. That's a better option than that I don't want him to consider it.

The image of Stella round with Stoneheart's child isn't objectionable on principle, but it does represent that I'd be losing her permanently, which is ridiculous because I've already lost her.

She'd make a wonderful mother.

Her chaos and willingness to go to hell and back for the people she cares about whether it be to protect them or to avenge them attests how protective and nurturing she'd be if she ever chooses that path.

The pain in my chest is only from the jealousy that it wouldn't involve me.



A CLATTER at the balcony doors of the library has me jolting to attention, thinking I'm going to have to perform my role as a bodyguard before I see the familiar figure through the glass.

I shush Stoneheart as soon as he enters, tilting my head to the sleeping Stella. The chill night air slips over my skin before he closes the door. It

contrasts with the warmth from fireplace to the side of the sitting area.

Stoneheart frowns but whispers. “How long has she been out?”

“She missed dinner,” I say back softly. “I don’t think she likes to hang out in the bedroom.”

Stoneheart’s brows raise as he glances around the at the library ambiance. “The bedroom is rather...lacking. I figured she may want a say in picking the décor.”

But her workshop he meticulously designed. My curiosity itches, begging for me to dig. I want to learn more about this gargoyle, but the mystery would just be a trap. Already the dark cozy library screams with intimacy.

It hadn’t been strange to be in here while Silas worked. We’d discussed the possible fae involvement with the missing people in hushed voices before he’d departed for the night.

But now, the light from the fireplace caresses each sharp edge and odd curve Stoneheart’s face and kindles something uncomfortable in my chest.

I shrug away my curiosity and stand, adjusting my suit. “Whatever she was working on seems to have taken a lot of energy. I’ll come back in the morning.”

“Wouldn’t you rather stay?” The gargoyle moves to a cabinet. The clink of glass is the only sound other than his words. He pulls out a bottle of amber liquid before filling one glass.

He lifts the bottle toward me in a silent offer of a drink. A warming drink to go with the heat curling in my stomach even as nerves threaten to freeze me where I am. Stay longer and offer more time for this gargoyle to spin a web of strategy and seduction around me?

I shake my head as I respond to his question. “That’s not a good idea.”

Watching Stella sleep should have been soothing, but it left me with time to contemplate just how unwise it would be to accept their offer.

“You must dislike me a great deal,” Stoneheart says on a hum as he puts the bottle away.

“Why do you say that?”

“Because I’m sure my lovely wife has informed you of your options. The world can see the feelings you have for her, and I know you’re attracted enough to me... I can only assume your reticence is from

dislike.” Stoneheart rounds the couch that Stella sleeps on. His graceful movement and the flickering shadows are as enthralling as his words.

“Are you used to the people you barely flirt with dropping to their knees for you?” I ask, even though I have no intention of playing this game with him. His arrogance galls me.

Stoneheart shrugs. “You want her. You respond to me. The arrangement could be very fulfilling for all parties involved.”

“Until I leave.”

“I’m not putting an end date on anything.” Stoneheart swirls the drink in his glass as if this was merely as simple as settling what to have for dinner.

Maybe for him, it is.

I glare at him. “I see your strategy.”

His smile is dangerous. “I doubt that.”

“Stella already told me you want my abilities.”

He nods with ease. “I do. It’s something I get access to as long as you stay enamored with my wife. I don’t need to have you pledge your loyalties to me. We can all be *flexible*.”

I swallow.

Stoneheart sits on the arm of the couch. Stella’s bare feet are curled in reaching distance. She’d kicked off her heels after picking a book from the shelf which lays face down on the floor telling the story of how she’d fallen asleep before finishing the first page. There’s a softness to his face that has me blinking. I’m caught off guard when he speaks next.

“If I hadn’t existed, would you have ever acted on your desire for her?” His pale gaze meets mine in challenge.

I don’t answer. It’s a question I’ve asked myself with little to show for clarity.

“You aren’t a fan of mine, but my presence has made you claim her as your responsibility, and responsibility is how you structure your life.” His brow arches. “You wouldn’t allow yourself to even breathe her air if it weren’t for me.”

He’s probably right, and I hate that. The underlying reason I should stay away from them isn’t only to avoid hurt. It’s to avoid causing conflict with my role as Kalos’s second-in-command. I have many responsibilities

to my family. I can't abandon those just because of a tantalizing witch... and a compelling gargoyle taunting me.

But he did say this could be flexible—I clench my jaw at my weakness.

What must it be like to notice the flaws of everyone and still take advantage of them?

Stoneheart makes an exaggerated sigh when I don't respond. "This is hardly the gratitude I'd expect."

"So you *do* want me to fall on my knees for you," I quip.

If I thought his smile was dangerous before, it doesn't hold a candle to the way his eyes glitter now. "I suspect there's a part of you that would enjoy that."

I take a breath, trying to not allow the tease to bring me back to the night he'd grasped my throat. Had that only been a couple of days ago?

Stoneheart tilts his head like a predator scenting blood. "When's the last time you let yourself be selfish? Let yourself imbibe in something that feeds the Ben part of you. Not the satisfaction you get from doing your duty, from serving, but something solely for you?"

I jolt at his use of my name. I open my mouth but don't have a clue what to say to that. Duty isn't my sole function... Right?

Luckily, Stella makes a soft sound, and both of our attentions snap to her.

"Stoneheart?" she asks blearily. "What time is it?"

"It's not very late," he responds as if he hadn't been weaving a spell over me. He moves to stroke her bare leg as if to soothe her but pulls away before contact. "Do you think you'll want to head to bed yet? You've napped for a long time."

I inhale, allowing my body to relax now that I'm not his focus.

Stella sighs and sits up. "I think I need to be awake for a little before I'm ready to sleep through the night. The energy drain hit me hard."

Her eyes widen when they land on me.

"Ben, you're still here. You watched me sleep?" There's a crease across one of her cheeks, and her hair is fluffed up in an adorable way.

"I may have enjoyed it," I joke.

"Do you want a drink?" Stoneheart asks as Stella blushes and tries to surreptitiously wipe away any drool.

She winces. “Just water. Didn’t Silas say there’s a mini fridge in here?”

I half expect that he’d bark the order at me, but the leader of multiple territories with a fearsome reputation puts down his drink and goes to the mini fridge, bringing back a bottle of water along with a granola bar from the snack stash.

“A little birdie told me that your aunt upset you,” he says.

She glares at him even as she accepts the items. “No thanks to you.”

“My apologies, I was distracted this morning. I should have warned you.”

The anger that had plagued her after the meeting returns now, threatening to whip her into a fury.

“I have something to help cheer you up.” Stoneheart makes an odd sound between a purr and a hum, as if to distract her from the dark emotions. From a pocket in his kilt, he withdraws a jagged dark shape, capturing one of Stella’s hands and placing his gift in it.

I blink to make sense of the object. “You got her a rock?”

Stella looks down at the rock in her palm with surprise. The light catches one of the faces of the stone and flashes blue. She gasps with delight and drops her granola bar. “A labradorite!”

His gaze meets mine full of amusement while her attention is devoted to the stone. “It’s for charm making.”

A thoughtful gift from a gargoyle who has treated her thoughtlessly in the past. It’s another puzzle I should avoid.

Stoneheart waits until Stella has touched each edge of the rock. When she looks up at him, it’s with a touched expression that’s edged with confusion as if sensing the same puzzle I am.

“Forgive me, wife,” he says. “I have been focused elsewhere. I should have told you about your aunt.”

Her gaze drops back to her gift. Her anger seemingly a bad memory when she shakes her head. “It wasn’t even just that.”

“Oh?” he asks.

Stella rolls the rock between her palms and even more tension leaves her shoulders.

“Thank you for this,” she says like she wants to drop the subject.

I should go, but I don’t move. Instead, allow myself to watch the stilted intimacy in front of me.

The workaholic and the witch. There's an apprehension between them that I've tried not to dissect. It's not that they love each other. If it were that, it would be so much easier to keep my distance. It's more that they circle each other like tigers who don't know if the person opposite of them will fulfill their desires or lash out.

Stella has plenty of reasons to suspect Stoneheart of hurting her. He's hard and driven. But why does Stoneheart seem just as leery of her?

Stella isn't in a hurry to answer Stoneheart's inquiry about what's bothering her, but I have information to share.

"Ariel seems to think that because of the history of this territory, your current actions aren't going to win the people over," I say.

Stoneheart sits back, making the arm of the couch creak threateningly. "That topic does keep coming up. Lorenzo apparently was an even worst leader than we'd been able to gather."

"I've actually done some research on that front," I say. It had taken a while to pull together the details. "His ascension to the role of territory leader was a bloody one that most don't talk about."

Both of them stare at me now. I continue, "Frank is the second eldest Leonid sibling. They had a sister who was set to inherit the role. The same week their parents died in a boating accident, she, her mate, and their son were killed in a suspicious home invasion."

Stella pales.

I continue, "Lorenzo claimed the position."

"Wouldn't Frank have been next?" Stella asks.

"It appears that he decided not to challenge his brother," I say. "They could have arranged it all with the understanding that Lorenzo would be the one to take up the mantle."

"This should have been common knowledge. How did they keep what happened from spreading to the other territories?" Stoneheart grits out.

I shrug. "They kept rumors of what had happened from spreading by force. Lorenzo married your mother, Stella, the next year. The Elderflowers were an influential witch family before the deal was made, and even they hadn't known what had happened."

"How did you get this information?" Stoneheart asks.

I shrug. "It pays to have multiple informants in other territories who have been around for a long time."

Stoneheart's eyes narrow as if he's going to demand to know my sources, but he holds back. He's a careful beast. I'll give him that.

No matter how *flexible* the situation is, becoming enmeshed with them is a conflict of interest.

STELLA

“THAT EXPLAINS why Ariel thinks using violence won’t win over the territory,” I breathe. Poor Mom being stuck in that situation. I’m comforted that at this moment she’s having the time of her life with spotty cell reception. She deserves it.

My marriage of convenience pales in comparison. I just have a gargoyle who is as hot and cold as a spring day and a demon I want to clutch like a safety blanket.

I turn the gift from my husband in my hands. Stoneheart leans over me, and I still. The power of his body pulls my attention as he picks up the granola bar I dropped on the couch and offers it to me again, but I shake my head.

I’m hungrier to marvel at the gift in my hands than food. He frowns but tosses it to the coffee table.

The gem hums sweetly against my palms. Labradorite can be used for many things in charm making, but generally is thought to enhance intuition and bring strength during times of change. It’s a common gem that I’ve been needing to replenish my supply of, but I’d hesitate to cut up this one. It’s a high-quality piece with strong electric blue and contrasting black veining that just makes me want to marvel at it.

And it’s meaningful. Labradorite is a stone of transformation and clarity. It’s exactly what I’d have picked for myself to rival the last couple of days.

Is my husband trying to romance me?

I shake my head, needing to focus on our situation and what would be best for the territory rather than this confusing gargoyle. “She mentioned that our relationship needs to be viewed as solid.”

Stoneheart shrugs. “We expected that.”

“Everyone seems to know that we haven’t...done the thing.”

Ben coughs, and it sounds suspiciously like a cut off laugh.

Stoneheart rolls his eyes. “We won’t fuck just to put people at ease. If we give in to the demands of terrified people, there’s no telling where it will end.”

Apparently with a baby. I can’t quite let myself voice that sentiment. I’m still mulling it over. It’s not like I’m against the idea of having kids, but risk is biting at our heels. This is hardly a stable situation.

Sex, on the other hand, isn’t an unexpected requirement for our situation even if I don’t like other people dictating my actions outside of the dominance play I’ve done with this gargoyle.

“It seems childish not to,” I say. And strange to discuss this in front of Ben who seems on the edge of leaving us for the night, but I want this conversation to involve him.

I want him to be as interested in this as I am even if he does remind me how temporary he is at inconvenient moments.

Stoneheart arches a brow. “As you’ve told me a time or two, you are not a pawn to be dictated to. And I am not someone who will be forced into action to appease the crowd. There are other options than us hopping into bed together.”

“Like what?” Ben shuts his eyes like he regrets voicing his question. “Never mind. I should be going.”

“Stay.” Stoneheart sets his glass down and addresses me next. “Perhaps we can appease them a different way with your demon’s help. There are ways around shifter noses. No one is going to check who puts my seed inside you.”

I nearly drop the damn rock. “What?”

Does Stoneheart’s gaze dance, or is that a trick of the fire? “Don’t misunderstand me, wife. I do want to fuck you, but call me selfish in that I don’t want it to be to assuage the masses. Especially not your aunt. She’s received enough of a show.”

My lower body tightens when he mentions wanting to fuck me.

“But you’d use me to do that same thing.” Ben’s voice is husky with a mix of exasperation and humor.

Stoneheart’s lips twitch as if he’s satisfied that he’s drawn Ben into the conversation. “I didn’t say you had to fuck her, but she likes you more than she likes me, so it’s up to the two of you.”

Ben and my eyes meet, and I wet my lower lip, thinking. The nap took care of the worst of the energy drain from charm making, and in the presence of Stoneheart’s words, awareness enters my limbs. No one has even touched me yet, but my skin prickles with sensation. A longing echoes through me, hitting each surface of my soul and amplifying in force.

Maybe it’s the limitations of this new life, but the option of being able to subvert the expectations of others tastes a lot like the freedom I used to take for granted. Everyone wins.

But the demon who I’ve traded insults with for almost our whole acquaintance doesn’t seem affected. He stands stock still, expressionless now that the option has been clearly laid out on the metaphorical table.

Stoneheart may be confident that Ben would choose this situation because a taste of me is worth the fall, but I’m under no such illusion.

I swallow my disappointment. I glance at Stoneheart. “He doesn’t want this.”

“Don’t speak for him,” Stoneheart says, his eyes on the demon. “Ask him.”

I hesitate long enough that Stoneheart arches his brow. I’m wary of giving him my submission again, but my curiosity pushes me forward, and I follow the directive.

“Will you help us?” I ask. Other questions don’t trespass on my tongue, but their shadows broadcast them. *Do you want me? Does my presence make you feel like everything is right in the world, like yours does for me?*

Or do I have to sacrifice having you too?

Ben’s soulful eyes have a dark undertone. “What about my scent? Shifters will be able to tell that I’ve—”

My mouth drops open as he snaps his mouth shut. That very much sounds like he’s considering this. Like he wants this.

“Mine will overpower yours,” Stoneheart says with a shrug like the concept of everyone knowing Ben is in our bed isn’t a worry at all.

“I actually have something for that.” My words are soft in my surprise.

They’re both staring at me now, and my cheeks burn. They’ll be aware of how much I’ve thought about this but...fuck it.

I reach into the pocket of my dress and place Stoneheart’s gift safely there before pulling out the bracelet I started yesterday that sent me straight into a nap to finish today. I’ve been trying to work up the nerve to present it to Ben after he’d stated so plainly that he’s leaving. A truth that I’ve been avoiding. But the liquid heat of my body attests that there’s no time like the present.

The rectangles that make up the band are masculine in nature, disguising the floral pattern set into it. Silver and gold intertwine in the shapes of forget-me-not blossoms. Instead of the blue gems I struggled to get to work yesterday, the petals are resin cast with the dried flower I’d used to summon Ben.

I needed to make it more personal for my magic to catch a hold and do what I needed it to.

I’d started to craft the charm with the intention of giving us the ability to be in contact without causing rumors, but my purpose became more direct with Stoneheart’s offer. I stand and round the coffee table, avoiding looking at Stoneheart.

I gesture, and Ben gives me his wrist.

“It will suppress your own scent, as well as block you from carrying anyone else’s,” I say as I clasp the charm in place. The loss of his sweet scent is instant, and my eyes water suddenly at the hole in my senses. I didn’t realize how much I enjoyed being able to breathe him in.

“A very clever and intricate working. You’ve made him a ghost,” Stoneheart says, interrupting my emotional upheaval, but there’s something dark in his voice that I don’t catch in my need to take in Ben’s reaction.

Ben frowns at the jewelry and doubts rush to the surface. I move to take the gift back. “You don’t have to use it if you—”

He stops me from removing the bracelet. “No, this is amazing. Thank you.”

Something whiplike and strong catches my wrist and pulls me back against a seated Stoneheart. The absence of Ben's scent is now flooded with the gargoyle's stormy one. His tail releases where it wrapped around my wrist, and he massages the spot.

"Apologies," Stoneheart says to me before addressing Ben again. "What do you say, Barnes? Will you assist in mixing our scents? Stella has been very open and generous. You have this moment to accept the proposal or to reject it. I won't allow you to play with her affections more than that."

I almost snort that Stoneheart is possessive of who is allowed to play with my feelings. That must be his position in my life. He strokes a hand up my bare arm, and my body relaxes against his harder one on instinct, my back pressing against his chest. His breath stirs my hair. We haven't been like this since our disastrous wedding night, and in this situation of us working together rather than him scheming against me...it's nice.

My humor dries up at Ben's silence. His dark eyes are locked on where Stoneheart's thumb caresses my wrist. My throat swells in sorrow. This is where the game ends. This is when Ben chooses to let me go.

There's a tug at my zipper, and I jump when Stoneheart brushes his lips over my ear. "We should let him see what he'd be forfeiting, don't you agree, wife?"

Breathing becomes difficult as my heart beats even faster. This gargoyle won't give up what he wants easily. And what about what I want? Will I really let Ben walk away from this without attempting to lure him?

No. If he's going to reject me, I'm going to make it hard for him.

I nod.

Stoneheart makes a sound of approval, and the zipper drags lower. The need prickling across my skin mixes with the metals of his rings as his knuckles coast up my spine.

There's a flavor to the metals, but my senses are crying out too loudly with the tease for me to decipher them. I'd much rather be tasting other things...

Ben's gaze follows Stoneheart's hand as the gargoyle pushes the dress from my shoulders, and it falls to my waist, baring the lace of my nude-colored bra.

I start to shake—in nerves or anticipation I don't know. Stoneheart's hand envelopes my fabric-covered breast, and I gasp in dismay at the barrier. I squirm against him, wanting skin against skin.

"Patience," Stoneheart murmurs as he massages me. His other hand traps me against his body, pressing his palm to my bare torso, talon tips tickling my ribs.

He pinches my nipple through the lace, and I suck in a breath.

"Is this what you've imagined doing?" Stoneheart rumbles over my skin, and it takes a moment to realize he's not speaking to me. "When you've thought of touching my wife, is it gentle or hard?"

Ben's Adam's apple jumps. "I'm only here to watch over her, not to fantasize."

I almost despair at the non-answer, but my husband's touch stirs my arousal with the expertise of a composer over his orchestra.

"Then watch me fuck my wife if you're so determined to watch over her." Stoneheart's dark words are like a whip, they sting as much as tighten the pit in my belly.

As much as I'm cautious of giving myself over to this gargoyle again, when he says things like that and touches me like he's doing now, his gravity sucks me in. I'd let him fuck me. If he keeps going like this, I'd even beg for it, though I'd be angry with myself in the morning for giving in so easily.

When he touches me, it all feels inevitable.

Ben's chest rises and falls, each breath greater than the last as if he's on the edge of drowning. He looks like he's going to run, but his gaze stays on where Stoneheart kneads my breast. I would never have assumed that I'd enjoy being watched, but when it's Ben watching me, or *fuck*, the idea of Stoneheart watching us, the sharp edge of need digs in.

I press my thighs together and falter at the easy wet slide and tug of pleasure in my core. Stoneheart inhales, scenting my arousal.

"Please stay," I blurt out before breaking on a moan as something tickles my inner thigh and slides against the wet fabric covering my pussy. I glance down to see Stoneheart's tail disappearing under my dress. I inch my legs a part to let him in, and my head falls back on a shaky sigh at the insistent pressure of it.

I want Stoneheart to growl for me like he'd done the one time we were together, but he doesn't.

"She's given you so much, but you won't even give her what she's aching for." Stoneheart's tone is scathing. Why does he sound angry?

I open my eyes to see Ben. Is he a step closer now? There's an intensity to his expression that makes my body pulse, and he's clenching and unclenching his hands as if to reach out and *touch*. I'm ready to start begging someone to stop this teasing and take me, but I need more than a quick orgasm. I want this demon who I have feelings for to choose this wild option before us.

I want him to choose *me*.

"I'll do it," he says, and I nearly cry out in relief.

Instead, I whimper as the gargoyle releases my breast to pull up the skirt of my dress as calmly as one would analyze the quality of curtains rather than exposing the lurid sight of his tail rubbing against my panties. The nude fabric is nearly see-through and clings indecently with how wet I am.

Ben's eyes drop, and a sound of need escapes his throat.

Stoneheart hums. "Good. Then kneel, demon."

The gargoyle presses my body to his with the hand on my stomach while his tail leaves my pussy to curl around my knee, pulling my leg up to spread my thighs wide. "Pay homage to our firefly where she needs you most."

I blink in surprise at the odd endearment, but my focus derails when Ben falls to his knees before me.

"See, kneeling isn't so bad," Stoneheart says, and the two of them share a silent conversation before Ben's hands slide up the back of my calves. He looks up, and my breath catches. The sclera of his eyes has disappeared into black pools.

I've never seen him display his otherness before, and to see it now cements the intimacy of this moment.

Ben presses his cheek into my inner thigh, his eyes falling shut. The warmth of his skin against mine is as reverent as the scrape of his stubble. He breathes me in, and I swear his exhale is going to be enough to catapult me into oblivion, but his eyes open, and the darkness through his lashes clutches me.

“It would be wrong of me to admit how much I’ve wanted this,” he says as his fingers trail up my inner thigh. His gaze and gritty words are filled with a fathomless yearning that makes me want to lean in and allow it to devour me.

“If I do, will it ruin the moment?” I ask, half teasing and half just needing him to do *something*. There’s a soft touch at the edge of the fabric keeping his touch from my bare pussy, and I try to grind against it, but the high-handed gargoyle holds me in place. I can barely move in his tight grip.

I assumed being between two men would mean more fucking—

Ben, as if he can’t bear to wait a moment longer, pulls at my panties—hard. The burn of the fabric stretching and pulling at my skin before it snaps makes way for the instant relief of cold air on overheated wet skin.

“Fuck!” I shout, before closing my lips and giving a flustered moan, remembering we’re in semi-public room in the penthouse.

Stoneheart’s laugh is low and soft. “All our rooms are soundproof, but the scent of what we’re doing will be obvious. Any of my people who know what’s good for them won’t step any closer to this room than they can help. Be as loud for our demon as you want.”

I open my mouth to complain about his teasing or calling Ben his demon but cry out as a hot tongue licks me instead.

My toes curl, and Ben’s mouth presses against me again, quicker, his tongue lashing me with wet efficiency that has me starting to dissolve. I moan with abandon even as the gargoyle at my back nuzzles my hair and watches the other man between my legs.

Ben doesn’t eat me in the same greedy way that Stoneheart did. Each lick and suck are strategic, punching my pleasure forward and pushing me toward climax faster than I thought possible.

I’m nearly there when Stoneheart moves my hands to clutch the skirt of my dress in place and slides his fingers through Ben’s hair, tugging it with purpose.

“Easy,” Stoneheart says. “This isn’t a task on a list to check off. This isn’t just to get her off.”

Ben’s tongue pulls away, and he glares at Stoneheart the way I want to. Or the way I would if I weren’t the better part of the way to an orgasm.

“Enjoy her,” Stoneheart rumbles. “Does she taste as sweet as you imagined?”

“Better.” Ben’s growl isn’t the vicious thing that Stoneheart’s is, but it still makes me shiver.

“Then savor her. Take what you need. For however long until you’re satisfied.”

Ben’s brow creases in confusion before it clears. He meets my gaze.

“Please don’t stop,” I gasp. And he doesn’t, but when he goes back to tasting me it’s with much less strategy.

Each stroke lingers and wraps my stomach in grasping warmth. I’m still being pushed higher and higher to climax, but with sweet explorations of each reaction rather than a direct path. The skin of my chest heats, and my body beats in a slower but still demanding rhythm when he gives a low moan against my pussy.

It’s as if I’m witnessing Ben’s hunger crack open before me.

“Better,” Stoneheart muses, and I try and fail in my half attempt to twist from his grip but settle when he purrs in my ear.

Ben’s actions become more direct. He kisses my pussy and sucks my clit leisurely before plunging his tongue as deep as he can inside me.

I shatter on a soft cry and arch against Stoneheart who croons nonsense in my ear.

Ben doesn’t stop, devouring my release. He switches his tongue inside me with his fingers, plunging deep, massaging me as if to coax more of my arousal for him to sip away. It doesn’t take long for the waves of pleasure that had brought me to the peak before to combine together for another.

It’s only on the third orgasm that I start to think that I should have considered what the two of them meant by Stoneheart telling him he can have me for however long he wants. Each orgasm chases away a little more of the apprehension that has plagued me since the moment I agreed to this marriage.

But I need to keep some of that caution.

I’m twisting in Stoneheart’s grip again, my arm reaching back as I dig my nails into the gargoyle’s neck, searching for a mercy he doesn’t seem to have. The burn of his hard cock pressing against my back the only sign that he’s enjoying the show.

I try and beseech the demon instead. "T-too much."

Ben makes a sound of frustration but eases up anyway. His fingers stay inside me, moving softly with my own fluttering body. I sigh in relief even as a masochistic part of myself pouts that he stopped. He sits back to take me in.

I'm buzzing with stimulation. Sometime between the second and third orgasm Stoneheart lowered the cups of my bra and started tugging punishingly at my nipples until they are a much deeper red than they naturally are, and I'm gasping like I can't catch my breath.

I'm utterly debauched and haven't even been fucked yet.

Ben's eyes are still dark. Taking in every detail of me as I do the same to him. His lips are shiny with my arousal and his cheeks flushed.

"Lift her higher," he says.

Stoneheart doesn't respond to the command at first. I'm sure he'd planned to run the show.

Ben's brow arches in challenge at my captor. "I have a job to do, don't I?"

I'm a messy toy between them, and the thought has another pulse of pleasure wringing through my core. It distracts me enough that I don't notice Stoneheart doing as Ben says until the kilt under me falls away, and my bare ass against the warmth of Stoneheart's abs, the gargoyle's throbbing shaft taps against my inner thigh.

His cock is the dark gray I remember. The purplish head oozes a bead of pearly precum.

Ben isn't careful or tender when he grabs Stoneheart's cock, swiping a thumb over the tip and spreading the fluid down the rest of the shaft with a rough pump.

"Fuck," Stoneheart hisses, pulling me higher and my legs wider to give Ben more room. and we both watch the demon work.

I whimper as Ben's mouth wraps around Stoneheart's thick cock, his cheeks hollow as he sucks. Jealousy burns in my chest that he's doing something I haven't dared yet only adds to the gathering pressure of his fingers stroking inside me, rubbing in a come-hither motion that makes another impossible climax start to build.

Stoneheart growls, and even though it's not as resonate as the sounds he'd used against me before, it has my whole body tensing around Ben's

fingers. Ben moans around the cock in his mouth, the top of his cheekbones have red flags, and his eyes are shut in an expression of the same bliss as when he licked me.

Stoneheart uses his grip on Ben's hair to push his head down until he gags before the gargoyle allows him up to gasp. Ben glares up at him before they return to their intoxicating battle. As angry as Ben seems to be, his mouth's grip on Stoneheart is hungry.

As if he is starving to shatter this gargoyle.

"He is very thorough," Stoneheart says, but his voice is crunching gravel. He's much more affected by this than he's voicing, and I'm wishing again that I was the one pushing him to lose control.

Teeth dig into my claiming mark sending me spiraling in time with the tense gargoyle behind me. Ben's moan is desperate as if he's getting too lost in the flavor of Stoneheart's precum to remember their feud.

Stoneheart makes a ferocious sound declaring his completion, and I nearly come myself from that alone.

Ben slides his fingers from me and smacks away the hand Stoneheart has in his hair, pulling his head away from the pulsing cock, leaving a mess of overflowing cum. Ben ignores the streams of white running down the tight fist he has around Stoneheart's knot and instead places his wet mouth to my pussy.

The slick texture change of his tongue and his fingers pushing inside me again has me whimpering as Ben fucks my husband's seed into me.

"That's it," Stoneheart pants in my ear. "Take it all like a good wife."

The juxtaposition of Ben between my legs pushing me to fly and Stoneheart caging me has me breaking apart in a stronger climax than all the rest.

I shout, pulsing around Ben's touch and inside my husband's embrace as flashes of color and light spark behind my closed eyelids.

"Fuck," Ben breathes as he watches me gaspingly come down from orbit. He slides his messy fingers from the clutch of my body.

I should be past done. I should be ready to curl up in a nap.

I shouldn't be wanting more, wanting Stoneheart's seed to be pushed deeper inside me by the dark-eyed demon on his knees, but this night has nothing do to with logic.

“Ben—” I start, needing him to fill me, to cement this act with something less structured and more primal. I want to pull his release from him as surely as he did for me. I want him to fuck me.

And instead of standing and completing my silent wish, he vanishes. It’s jarring.

Ben’s stiff form breathing hot breaths against my pussy, his eyes so direct and surprisingly vicious one moment and alarmed the next are suddenly gone.

As if he was never here.

I gasp, my head falling back on Stoneheart’s shoulder as a tremble starts in my limbs. All at once I feel so completely lost.

I don’t complain when he kisses my hair.

“Well,” Stoneheart starts, his voice rough. For once, the gargoyle doesn’t seem like the ruler of the universe. “That was unexpected.”

REMY

“YOU’RE MORE BROODING than usual this morning,” Silas says.

“People living in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones,” I respond.

Silas shrugs before inhaling. The library still carries the scent of last night. He nods to me, satisfied at the apparent consummation of my marriage.

Not even his sharp senses would be able to pick up Ben’s assistance. I’ve always known that Stella is good at what she does, but the charm she’d presented last night is nothing less than masterful. My mouth twists bitterly. She’s too good at maneuvering around my plans, and she doesn’t even know it.

She gifted Ben Barnes something priceless. Freedom.

The pressure of others knowing he is involved in my marriage was a lever that I’d been at the ready to press to keep him here. Or at least to help him make the correct decision in the end. I have other options, but I don’t like losing a contingency.

That isn’t the only cause of my mood.

I should be thrilled. The seduction last night was a success.

But I’m *brooding*.

“Shall we begin?” Francesca asks.

I turn from my contemplation at the window, and Stella is there, sitting at the table, waiting to be included in the business of the territory. As smoothed over and neat as I’ve ever seen her.

Nothing hints at the debauched woman of the night before except for the threading of my scent with hers.

Part of me is satisfied that she carries my scent. The other part doesn't know what to do with her presence. For all my study of her, I don't know what's driving her to have a position in this territory. If it were only revenge, that would be simple.

When our eyes meet, there's a distance in her expression that there wasn't last night. She enjoyed our activities, but something is different this morning.

She is one mystery after another.

The meeting goes quickly. There isn't much new information, but we do have a solid number of at least fifty-four individuals missing and a loose timeline. The last family went missing right before Lorenzo Leonid met his end. The first, nearly a year or so ago.

The trickle was small and slow. A couple of shifters, but mostly the rarer types of paranormals, which doesn't bode well for our ability to find them. We will try though. I've sent people to all the surrounding fae gates for covert surveillance.

The paperwork to get anyone through a gate is extensive and would take time to forge. For now, we're sure that they weren't trying to be shuttled through the gate in my original territory or any of Kalos's if the dragon is to be believed, and I do believe him.

Kalos is one of the rare types of paranormal who would be the target of an operation like this if he weren't so powerful. He'll work with us for a world in which those like his unborn child aren't targeted.

"What can I do?" Stella's words are full of determination, fire, and the room falls silent.

My seconds both look to me. Francesca's look is more along the lines of don't fuck this up while Silas is more considering. They wouldn't say no to any assistance that Stella would provide but won't go against my wishes.

I grit my teeth at the idea of Stella interviewing people, making herself vulnerable to the very people we are trying to discover.

"We have this handled," I say, and the look on Stella's face falters before she nods.

What is she wanting? I thought her workshop would provide the outlet that she needed, not to mention the demon's company, but I seem to be overlooking something in the care and feeding of a wife.

Francesca looks like she wants to throw something at me but just rolls her eyes instead.

The meeting wraps up quickly after that. Silas and Francesca are out of the room when my wife approaches me. Her spine is straight and chin lifted. Her stiff posture in this moment is a striking contrast to when I held her writhing body.

She's erected walls that I want to tear down, but to do that without a plan to be the support she needs is perverse.

"I'm going out today to visit with Katarina today," she says.

"Oh, are you?" The words are out before I can stop them. Fuck my distracted tongue.

Her eyes narrow. "Yes, I am. We'll be in Kalos's home, and I'll be next to his expecting mate so it's not a security risk."

I would have to trust Kalos...which I do, but it doesn't mean that the idea of having Stella outside of the territory is easier to accept.

"If I spend another day here, I can't be held responsible for what I do. You obviously don't need me for anything, and Katarina wants to catch up. So, I'm going." There's a wideness to her eyes that verifies her words. She's feeling shut in. And why shouldn't she? Until the territory is stable, her every movement must be accounted for.

I wouldn't have lasted half as long as she has, so why do I expect her to stay where I want her?

Ben won't let anything happen to her. With that thought, the unease in my chest dissipates. He'll be on his home turf even. The safest place for her right now is with Kalos.

"I hope you enjoy yourself." I can't crush her just because I don't want her out of my grasp. She must be allowed to flit and flutter to her heart's content.

I ignore the fact that, somehow, I've come to trust the demon. I can trust him to keep Stella safe...but I also believe he wouldn't keep her from me, and there is no logical reason for it.

How troubling.

The demon of the hour strides into the library wearing his usual suit. There's only a single hitch in his step when his eyes glide over to the couch we'd desecrated last night, but there's no scent of embarrassment or arousal. There's no scent at all.

And I hate it.

As much as I hated the burn of the emotion I felt when she gave Ben the charm. I'd enjoyed sharing her body with him, but the fact that he wears a charm that she crafted specifically for *him*...this type of jealousy could very well destroy my plans.

"You're taking me to hang out with Katarina today." Stella's sharp tone freezes Ben in his tracks, and his eyes widen. I take comfort in the small fact that I'm not the only one on the other side of her walls this morning.

"Okay," he says.

"I'll get my bag," she says and leaves.

His confusion is comical.

"What did I do?" he asks.

That he would ask me when they've been a team of two pulls a smile from me that I wipe away with a hand to my mouth, contemplating.

"You did leave rather abruptly last night," I say.

His cheeks redden. "I didn't mean to."

I nod in understanding. He was overwhelmed. I could track that even without using his scent as a guide. We offered him a feast, and he gorged but ran when the tide of the moment waned.

"She's not thrilled with me either," I share in commiseration. "I didn't necessarily fall over myself and agree when she stated her plans for today."

"She'll be safe with me," he says, and his expression hits me soundly in the chest. He understands what I'm struggling with. Our emotions on the subject may very well be running the same trail, and that sort of sharing—this seeing and being seen—is something I rarely experience.

I clear the sticking point in my throat like that will dispel this exposed sensation.

"She'd better be."

STELLA

“OH MY GOD,” Katarina says, her eyes wide. “That is...so much. Oh my god!”

“I know!” I nearly knock over my mug of tea. It’s a giant relief to share how wild my new life is with someone who won’t shoot back even more preposterous plans and act like all this makes any fucking sense.

It almost seems worse to go over all the outlandish details in a place that reverberates calm. As much calm as you can get in a dragon’s lair anyway. The curated grounds sprawl around us. The colors are starting to change in the cool weather.

Just a few weeks ago, Katarina and I would hang out on this patio and gossip about anything and everything.

And now I’m back as a married woman and with a bunch of unbelievable news.

“Wow.” Katarina’s hands rub over her baby bump thoughtfully. “I knew that Ben wanted you, but Stoneheart also wanting Ben is a surprise.”

“Fuck, you can’t tell Kalos,” I say, annoyed at myself for not considering that. “He can’t have any reason to doubt Ben’s loyalty. Ben would never leave him.”

Katarina waves my concern away. “Kalos is a big bad dragon. He can make his own decisions about his organization.”

I breathed a sigh in relief. “So yeah, that’s me, also the terms must have been good enough for Ben because I got tongue fucked into oblivion.”

Katarina snorts before becoming serious again. “And that solved the whole, people wanting you to consummate your marriage?”

“Seems to have for now at least,” I say, not including that the very action seems to have led to opening a can of worms of imaginings that leave me squirming.

“And Stoneheart was, like, there?” Katarina whispers, a little scandalized but more marveling.

I choke out a laugh. “Don’t get any ideas. Kalos would fry someone before doing the same. Stoneheart doesn’t feel the same about me as your mate does about you.”

Katarina frowns. “Just because someone wants to share, doesn’t mean that his feelings for you are less.”

I shake my head. “You’re right. Obviously, in general, people can have deep feelings and be polyamorous. I just...” My shoulders fall. “He doesn’t feel that way about me.”

Something did seem to be bothering him last night if his biting tone was anything to take note of. If he were anyone else, I’d assume it was jealousy, but it’s his plan. Why would he go along with it if it made him jealous?

“Are you sure?” Katarina asks.

I shrug. “No. He’s a vault. There’s no way of knowing his true intentions. So, for now, it’s better for me to believe he doesn’t feel that way about me.” Because if I believe differently, I’ll start deluding myself like I did the first night.

Katarina hums. “This all explains why Ben was so quiet this morning.”

“Quiet how?” I ask and want to castigate myself for it, but Katarina understands. If anyone can empathize with having feelings for someone who acts emotionally unavailable, it’s her. Kalos wasn’t all sunshine and rainbows when she started living with him. He’s still not all sunshine and rainbows unless he’s looking at his mate.

The love he shows for Katarina makes the clusterfuck I’m dealing with worth it. I’m glad my friend is happy and loved. She deserves it.

Katarina sips from her tea before responding. “Not a bad quiet. Like he was thinking.”

I hate the way he left after what we did last night. It felt like he’d led me up a mountain with each lick, and when I held out my hand for the last

step, he pushed me to fall.

I keep having to remind myself that he hasn't made me any promises.

Stoneheart had been surprisingly comforting last night. Not with words, but with affection that mirrored what I've read aftercare is like, carrying me to our bedroom when my limbs were at their most noodle-y and cleaning me up. I'd been so surprised that I let him do it.

But that didn't stop me from waking up alone in the bed.

I shake my head. "I feel at odds with this. Like if I think about it for too long, I'll build it into something it's not, but what else am I supposed to do? I have no purpose. I took some comfort before the wedding thinking that at least at the beginning, Stoneheart and I would be building a relationship together."

Katarina's face softens in understanding.

"I was all in," I say. It's hard to confess that, and I frown in frustration. "But Stoneheart has been clear that isn't going to be my role, and he doesn't seem to want me involved in the territory no matter how often I ask to help."

I make an empty gesture, running out of words. I want to kick ass at what I do, and without that, I'm lost. Like a core part of me is left dangling in the wind with the rest of my attributes that don't quite fit anymore.

"Was your life's purpose before the wedding only about revenge?" Katarina asks without judgment.

"No." I blow out a breath, trying to remember how I was just a week and a half ago. Yes, I had that smoldering anger against Lorenzo Leonid, but I was settled in my life. "I was filling a need by helping people with my charms. Now my aunt wants me to take her place on the board for the organization that runs the nonprofits in the territory. She thinks that it will help people learn to trust me."

Ariel had detailed this all in an email she sent not too long after our meeting. My aunt seems to be full of all kinds of ideas.

"But you're not feeling it?"

I sigh. "They're for good causes, but it's not me. There's not a single thing that I'd be more equipped to handle than someone else who has more passion and experience for the role."

I look at my friend's pregnancy belly. "She also thinks having a baby will help things along."

"Whoa!" Katarina's eyes bug out. "Okay, time out. You guys haven't even slept together like that."

"I know! But at least that's a way to ease the fears of the territory that only I can provide."

The concept has circled my thoughts and won't leave them. I could do it. It would help everyone settle down and solidify the safety of the territory.

Katarina tilts her head bringing me back to our conversation. "Is easing the fear of others solely your responsibility?"

"Shouldn't it be? People are relying on me."

Katarina holds up a finger, and her brows crease in thought. She's good at thinking about the big picture. She'd have to be with her history of pulling off heists from well secured places.

The silence of letting her think through things gives me a moment to breathe. This is all happening so quickly.

My phone starts to buzz, and my eyes widen when I see who it is. "Fuck, it's my mom."

"You haven't told her yet?" Katarina's question is nearly a screech. "And you're sitting here contemplating having a baby? She can't stay on a cruise forever."

"I'm waiting until she gets back!" I wince. The guilt I've been ignoring peeks its head up. I have three days until she gets back. I'd hoped that things would be more settled by the time she returned, but I had no idea what actually went into being a key player in a territory take over.

"Well answer it!" Katarina says.

I take a moment to calm myself so that the perceptive woman on the other end of the line doesn't pick up on it. She's always been too good at that.

"Hi, Mom," I say brightly.

"Hey, sweetie, I missed your voice and just wanted to check in while we had good service."

"I'm just hanging out with Kat. How is your trip going?"

"You should see the flowers here! I know you had to stay home for work, but I really wish you could have come with me."

I huff a laugh. “I don’t think I would be into analyzing all the greenery like you are.”

My mother’s specialty is plants. They always do as she instructs, and the garden at our townhouse is otherworldly. It’s a good thing it’s on a watering timer because if I was supposed to keep it alive while she was gone, it would have died by now.

“No. You’re quite right. The sights have been lovely though, and there’s all types of jewelry stands about,” she says, and my lips twitch. Just as I don’t have an affinity for plants, Mom doesn’t care a wit for jewelry or the materials.

“We’ll have to plan another trip sometime,” I say before thinking it through. My smile falls. How exactly would I go on vacation now? Would I need to take security with me?

My mother agrees, not picking up my thoughts through the phone, and continues to gush about all the activities and the food, and for a few minutes I give soft sounds of input for each one.

“That sounds so amazing,” I hum. “I bet you’re bummed that you’ll be coming home soon.”

“Actually, about that...I’ve sort of met someone. Well, someone we know.”

My eyes widen. “What?”

“You remember Carl?”

I’m at a loss for a minute with all the new names and faces I’ve met since my wedding, but finally it clicks.

“Carl the wolf shifter?” I ask, frowning, and she hums in confirmation.

Carl is the landlord of the building my shop was in. I had been nervous when he’d bought the property a couple of years ago, but he’s been amazing to work with and sorted out an annoying zoning issue with the Council for me a year ago.

I thank him by bringing him lunch every so often. He’s actually the one who suggested the cruise, having met Mom and gotten talking about growing things the few times she’s visited my shop. Suspicion has my eyes narrowing.

“It turns out he’s on this cruise too. Isn’t that a wild coincidence?” she asks.

“Wild,” I croak.

Mom laughs a little awkwardly. “Well, we kind of hit it off.”

“Is that so?”

Katarina tilts her head in curiosity at the expression on my face. *She met someone*, I mouth at Katarina, and her brows rise up in a delight I wish I could share in whole-heartedly.

Mom continues shyly, “He’s offered to be my traveling buddy if I wanted to extend my trip by a week and do a tour that includes the Dominica Botanic Gardens and some rainforest treks!”

“That sounds amazing,” I squeak.

“I know! So, you’d be okay with that?” Mom goes from giddy to concerned in a flash.

“Of course I’m okay with that. Are you sure about Carl?” I ask. The guy seems great. I’ve always really liked him, but this all is way too convenient... “Traveling together is a big step.”

There’s a rustle on the other side of the phone as if Mom is moving to another room. The realization that Carl is probably with her right now is a little jarring.

When she speaks again, it’s with a heartfelt confidence that’s usually absent when she’s focusing on herself. “He makes me happy. I don’t want to be careful about this.”

Because Mom has been careful about things as long as I can remember. And now, with hearing the history of the man she married, I understand why.

“I’m happy for you.” And I’ll kill Carl if he fucks this up for her. Maybe he did maneuver to go on the same cruise as her because he’s always liked her, maybe it’s all one happy coincidence.

And maybe I’m going to ask my husband questions because Carl gained me seven more days on top of the three I currently have to prepare for Mom’s return, but I don’t see how Stoneheart could have had a hand in planning that.

“I won’t keep you if you’re hanging out with Kat, but are you doing okay? You sound a little down,” Mom says.

I grimace, but I don’t want to hide everything from her. She’s always been my greatest champion, and I miss her like crazy. “Just a lot of stuff coming up, and I’m not quite sure how to handle it all.”

“Is it the Council again? Carl did say they were making noise about that zoning rule with charm makers.”

I almost laugh. The Council is definitely a part of it, even if the noise they are making is affecting me differently than before.

“It’s something like that,” I admit. “There are a lot of rules in our world.”

“I can ask Carl—”

“No, you two enjoy your vacation. I have people on my side.” The truth of that statement rings. Everything feels confusing right now, but I have allies: Ben, Katarina, and Kalos. Even Stoneheart and his people are all working toward the same goal.

I’m just unsettled because I don’t know what role to take toward that goal.

“All right.” Mom’s voice is soft, soothing. “I have the utmost confidence in you. You are Stella Elderflower. You follow your own rules, always have. You are unstoppable when you put your mind to it.”

“Thanks, Mom.” I swallow the emotion, and we bid our goodbyes.

Under all the guilt I’ve piled on myself, there’s a shine of truth that Mom reminded me of. I’ve handled myself for years. I started my business from scratch, and now my charms are sought after throughout the territories.

I brought down my most hated adversary.

I am Stella-fucking-Elderflower.

Katarina and I are silent for a moment, but when I glance at her, there’s a sparkle in her eyes as if she’s holding back her words. I’m glad to have a friend who knows me so well.

“I’m going about this wrong,” I say.

“I was just coming to that conclusion,” Katarina says. “Your aunt has provided recommendations, but that doesn’t mean it’s the only way forward.”

I nod. “I’ve been relying too much on the direction of others because I felt directionless.”

“And now?”

Something quaking and frantic in my chest *settles*. “I’ve been reminded that I’ve always needed to find my own way, and that I’m good at making things work out.”

The responsibility and the weight of the territory is still heavy, but it's less like an inevitable draw and more like a pendulum gearing up the next swing of action.

The clarity is startling, but I'm under no illusion wrestling my new position will be easy. There's a certain gargoyle who may take issue, but he had his chance to offer me the position I needed, and he squandered it as surely as the opportunity for a real mating.

So I'll make my own position.

I voice my thoughts. "The Leonid territory is as much mine as it is his, and it's time I act like it."

BEN

“YOU’RE DISTRACTED,” Kalos says.

“I’m not.” I turn from the window, unable to catch sight of Stella and Katarina on the patio below. She’s perfectly safe, but that doesn’t make it easier not to have eyes on her. I turn my wrist, the feel of the heavy bracelet there grounding me.

My boss gives me a bored look. “That wasn’t a question.”

I shake my head and focus my attention back on my tablet. “Things seem to be going well. Keller has really stepped up.” The words leave a sour taste on my tongue. “I guess I’m more replaceable than I thought.”

Kalos harrumphs and the disgruntled sound pulls a smile from me. “You are no such thing. Your absence is merely the price I must pay for this alliance.”

That’s not quite true, but the look on his face says that he’s aware that I’m the one choosing to involve myself in Stoneheart’s business.

“It’s not necessarily a bad thing to find something that won’t let your attention go,” Kalos says.

Would he say that if he knew that a portion of my mind is stuck in the memory of last night? Stella’s body bared and her soft pussy wet with anticipation. Her tart flavor nearly had me coming in my pants...as much as the throb of Stoneheart’s cock against my tongue. The gargoyle is a siren’s song I was unprepared for.

“I’m loyal to you,” I say.

“I would never question that, but—” He shrugs, and my heart falls. “It’s not a bad thing to find someone.”

I make a dismissive sound. “It is if she’s married to a different territory leader.”

Kalos arches a brow. “I’ve known you since you were a boy, don’t try and tell me she’s the only one on your mind.”

I blink in shock. How?

The dragon’s golden eyes trap me, and he does that head tilt thing predators do when scoping out prey but what he’s sniffing out are secrets rather than a tasty rabbit. “Gargoyle societies are polyamorous. I was suspicious when he requested your services as bodyguard for his mate. That’s not a position he’d give to many.”

I don’t know how to respond to the fact that Kalos was aware of Stoneheart’s intentions before I was and still allowed me to accept the position. “You’re my family.”

“As you are mine,” Kalos says as if this is a fact rather than something he never admitted to before having a mate opened his heart. “And family doesn’t stop being family just because a crafty gargoyle is courting you.”

My cheeks burn. “I have responsibilities here, and he’s not *courting* me.”

“Maybe he should be. You are worth the effort.”

“Kalos—”

“I know you like change as much as I do”—which is not at all—“but you need to realize that having a family isn’t only about responsibility. We want you to be happy. I want you to be happy.”

I glare at him, at a loss for how to respond. “This influence Katarina has on you is unsettling.”

He snorts, but shrugs. “That’s true. And there’s always the possibility that Stoneheart will accept paying a hefty price when he does make his move to keep you. The Leonid territory is quite an awkward chunk to keep all together.”

I choke and bark a laugh. “You greedy bastard. That’s never going to happen. You have plenty of territory.”

I shake my head and let the mirth flow at the ridiculous notion that Stoneheart would ever pay some sort of bride price to be with me.

I'm glad for the break in tension, but that doesn't stop my thoughts. I become serious once more. "I won't be leaving for them. This is a temporary," I say.

Kalos only nods, not pushing for any more details, but the whisper of my thoughts doesn't stop.

The door to the office opens without a knock, and my boss's pregnant mate strolls in. The only person who can get away with interrupting the territory leader.

Kalos's attention snaps to her, his brow furrowed with concern. "What do you need? Was it too cold outside?"

Katarina is gestating a dragon and at the beginning of the pregnancy nearly died from how much heat the child was drawing from her. She'd needed to have contact with Kalos to keep from going hypothermic.

Kalos's focus is on Katarina, but mine is solely on Stella who follows her into the room. She tilts her chin up when our gazes meet. There's a fire there I didn't expect. She'd been sharp with me this morning, but this confidence is different. Pointed.

Katarina smiles at her mate. "I'm fine. Stella is just ready to go, and I missed you."

Instead of scoffing that they'd only been separated for a couple of hours at most, Kalos pulls her into his lap as if he missed her more but held himself back to give her space.

This side of my boss is always a shock to see displayed. He's always been caring and supportive, but never showed it.

I'm happy for them if a little jealous.

I turn to Stella who has the same bit of wistful wanting on her face mine probably shows. Even though we are intimate, we will never have what they have. Our arrangement isn't about heart feelings even if I have permission to give her "comfort."

"You want to go already?" I ask.

"We have things to do," she says, but doesn't elaborate.

We take a few steps away from the happy couple, and Katarina waves a cheerful goodbye to us before I grasp Stella's hand, and we leave. Kalos's nod of understanding stays with me as I slip into the shadows I navigate even after we get to her workshop.

Stella doesn't waste any time. Her eyes snap open after squeezing them shut for the trip. "I want to check out the place of the last family to go missing."

"What?"

"Their home is probably how they left it, and I want to see if I can pick up anything."

I shake my head. "Stoneheart isn't going to want you wandering—"

"*Stoneheart* isn't the boss of me," Stella says, her voice strong and level.

My brows lift. "You're his wife."

"Which doesn't equate to servant. We are partners," she says. "I am not a prisoner here."

"And you think if you check out the scene, you'll be able to help?" I'm trying to follow her train of thought. She's a charm maker. She's skilled at what she does as shown by the bracelet she gave me, but that doesn't give her any advantages when it comes to tracking people down.

Stella keeps her response measured. "I'm a witch with a specialty in objects. I may be able to tell more than Stoneheart's people have been able to glean. Tracking witches focus on other things."

Stella is planning to involve herself in a search for people we may never be able to find. I want to object, to save her from the unsavory bits of this, but her eyes are steely. She won't be deterred.

"This is my territory. I want to know what I'm working with. I need to do all I can for the people here—" Her voice breaks. The thread of vulnerability exposed pulls on my very soul. She clears her throat and glares at me. "And I'm not waiting for anyone else's permission."

The passion of Stella that lent so much urgency to her revenge and dimmed in the subsequent lull of victory, burns bright now.

How could I ever deny her?

She continues. "I know Silas has shared the details with you. Are you going to help me or hinder me?"

Are you with me or against me? She doesn't say the words, but the meaning is clear. She's doing this whether I help her or not.

"Your wish is my command," I murmur.

Stoneheart will not be pleased.



WE ARRIVE at the address in no time, and it's simple to talk the landlord into giving us a key. He takes one look at Stella and practically falls over himself to get her what she asks for.

The people of the territory know who their lady is.

Stella doesn't show surprise at the behavior, but I know she is. The Firefly is full of Stoneheart's people and shifters of the territory who are expecting to see her. They're respectful, but not like this. This reaction is closer to reverence. Like she really is some prophesized leader coming to make everything better.

When we enter the apartment, thoughts of the landlord fall away.

The place is cozy, but the air is stagnant. There are the usual things that people surround themselves with. A throw blanket is bunched on the couch, curved in the way as if a child or petite adult lifted their legs out of it instead of casting it off to get up for something. There's a bowl of popcorn on the counter that's long gone stale.

The only disruption in all this is the red wax circle on the ground.

"That's from the trackers, right?" Stella asks, pointing to the wax.

I nod. The presence of the spell is sobering, and I pull up the information I have on this case.

"Carrie and Beth Sova along with their two children, went missing the day Lorenzo was defeated. No one noticed anything until the kids didn't show up for school on Monday." I scowl. "And no one alerted authorities until Stoneheart came asking."

"Do we know what they are?"

"Sirins. Owl women," I explain. Their file says they fall under the designation of harpies, though that didn't seem to offer them any additional protection.

"Rare?" she asks.

"Very," I breathe.

"And no one said anything?" Stella frowns. "This territory is ripping itself apart."

I agree. The people are letting fear eat them alive, and the sense of community that usually exists in places where paranormal creatures live in

such close quarters is absent.

“They’re focusing on surviving,” I say.

“Letting part of the herd be picked off because then at least it’s not them.” Stella’s gaze burns with a frustration. “This type of fear is poison.”

I nod. This is a blight. There’s no trust and no care past those in one’s own household, and since it’s a whole family being taken at a time, there’s no one left to be their voice.

Especially in a territory where the leadership is one of the things to fear. “Lorenzo did a number here.”

“Why not just leave the territory?” Stella asks.

I shrug. “I imagine it’s for many reasons. People have roots here, it’s one thing to feel afraid, it’s another to be completely alone.” I pause for a moment on that thought. “People will suffer much to keep from being alone. There’s also no guarantee for them that another territory would be better.”

Stella avoids the circle on the floor and starts running her hands over objects, paying more attention to things of metal or stone before continuing. “What do the trackers think? The morning meetings are more about the problem as a whole than finding a single family.”

Silas has kept a running report of updates that I have access to, so I don’t have to sift through the information to answer her.

“They’re doing their best, but so far, they haven’t been able to deduce much. The perpetrators could have used a portal spell which would break any trail, but it’s more likely that they took them by vehicle, and the trail is too cold to pick up with starting to look for them so late.”

Stella raises her hands as if she’s feeling the air for a moment before returning to objects. She halts for a moment at a photo frame on the bookshelf before continuing. I can’t pick up on anything, but demons tend to be sensitive to the energy of people rather than places or things.

Not that I’m very schooled in demon abilities. I only started cultivating my ability to teleport to stop myself from ending up in the middle of the street in my sleep.

I stay silent as Stella works through the apartment. There’s a trinket dish next to the sink with a ring that looks like a wedding band. When Stella strokes the metal, she sucks in a breath.

“You found something?” I ask.

Stella shakes her head. "Not really. The wearer was really happy. I guess this territory isn't the worst place to live."

Moments of happiness to blot out any simmering unease.

She walks through the rooms until she reaches a window and freezes.

"This charm is one of mine." Her hand goes to the windchime hanging in the window.

She frowns. "It's a pretty potent one too. It links with the house wards. No one should have been able to enter the apartment with ill intent."

I mentally sift through what is suspected about the perpetrators. "Would it work against fae magic?"

"I'd have to do research." Stella sounds distant as she thinks. "Charms are more cemented in purpose, but it makes them inflexible. Fae magic is wilder, but I've never seen any strong enough to rip a ward or charm's intention apart."

That sort of magic only exists in the fae realm which doesn't commingle with this plane much past trade and other various pursuits. The fae on this side of the gate are relatively powerless since their source of magic comes from the realm itself. Those who are here have fled the realm for one reason or another. Maggie came here some years ago because her mate was involved in a rebellion and was killed.

"What if they didn't need to rip the ward apart?" My stomach sinks. "What if they could slip past it?"

"Like Kat does," Stella says, her face whitening. "You don't think her skill is unique?"

Katarina has fae blood, and it's what we think allows her the nifty trick of walking through wards which made her such a formidable thief.

"I need to talk to someone who knows about fae magic," Stella says. "The charms that people have, the wards even, may have loopholes to that magic system."

"If that's true, it changes all the protections people assume they have here. How would this not have occurred before?" I ask. How could the Council, or even Kalos, not be aware of something like this?

"Maybe no fae has ever had the inclination for this?"

I frown. "Or maybe they have, but a single person going missing here or there isn't a problem. Maybe whoever is behind this got greedy."

“Or desperate. If they are fae, they’ll be affected by the motion going through the royal court.”

“We thought that Lorenzo was desperate when he was dealing with Kalos for that gate,” I say. “And that was before we found out about his gambling debt.”

“Do you think...” Stella trails off, horror shows on her face. “Do you think that Lorenzo was trading people from this territory to pay off his debts?”

The fact that there was no outcry when people started going missing, no record of Lorenzo addressing it at all, no confidence that the authorities would do anything.

The sum of all the variables makes my answer grim.

“I do.”

“Fuck,” she says.

Indeed.

STELLA

I BREATHE in the city-tinged air as Ben leaves his card with the landlord in case the man thinks of any other information to share with us. He seems more likely to reach out to me rather than Stoneheart's people.

When Stoneheart claimed this territory, he became the new bogeyman. The king on a throne of blood.

My father sold his own people.

The sun is bright, but my soul feels cold. I just keep seeing the smiling women in the photograph with their arms around their daughter and son, the son sticking his tongue out.

"Stella." The growl is familiar, but the man in the business suit is not. I frown at the stranger. There's a black car behind him and a few people standing at attention who I've seen before but can't quite place.

"What are you doing here?" he hisses as he strides forward. I freeze when I realize why a human-looking man with pale eyes and an entourage of people around him knows who I am.

I would recognize this force even with my eyes closed.

"Stoneheart," I say in greeting.

There's a surprised hitch in his step. Is it because I can identify him through his glamour, or is it my unapologetic tone? Ben steps closer behind me in support. If he's surprised by Stoneheart's appearance, he doesn't show it, but there's a wariness about him.

"I wanted to see the scene of the most recent missing family. You might not think I can be helpful, but it's my place to assist," I say.

Stoneheart's face disagrees, but he doesn't voice his opinion about my *place* in this territory. Probably because people are watching. And they are watching. The noisy street seems to have suddenly quieted. The humans still walk by, oblivious to what's playing out. But the people hiding in plain sight, seated at the outdoor café next to the Sova's building, waiting with a stroller to cross the street, pretend not to be trying to overhear our conversation.

Shifters and whatever other magical folk reside here are watching.

There's a pause before Stoneheart strides back to the car and opens the door to the town car.

"Get in the car, wife," he grits out.

I swallow at the sight of the giant back seat he's directing me to. A shiver of trepidation runs up my spine at his anger, but it only serves to remind my body of what we did last night.

I knew he'd be unhappy with me, but I won't let the controlling gargoyle tell me what my purpose is anymore. He had his chance.

I'm tempted to get out of riding with him, but with a look at his expression, which is eerie with a human face, I decide not to risk it.

With my decision made, I approach him.

"Lady Stella," a younger blond man says from behind my husband with a touch of awe in his voice. "It's an honor to meet you."

Stoneheart rolls his eyes. "Andrew, ride back with Silas."

"Who's that?" I ask after the man ducks his head bashfully and walks to the other car. An official guy with a stiff posture and glasses who I assume is Silas in glamour nods to me before entering the vehicle.

"Your cousin. I'm making him useful. Now, get in the car." He glares at Ben. "Meet us back at the penthouse."

"I'll remind you again that I don't take orders from you," Ben says coolly before checking with me.

The leather of the back seat is comfortably warm after the chilling things we've discovered, but Stoneheart intends this to be a private ride together. *Fuuuck*.

The gargoyle narrows his eyes at me, and I meet the challenge.

"It's okay, Ben. I'll see you back at the penthouse," I say.

The look on Stoneheart's face says Ben's going to pay for resisting his order. He leans toward him, his voice low. "You told me that she'd be safe

with you.”

“I was safe,” I argue.

“But not secure,” Ben says as if on some other wavelength than me. “I knew what I was doing, and I’ll pay the price for it.”

Stoneheart’s nostrils flare, but Ben is gone before he can push him in the car with me like he seems tempted to.

With grace and what must be the most expensive type of glamour, Stoneheart slides into the back seat with me. I go to move to the seat across, but his hand grips my thigh as if to keep me from moving away from him.

The privacy window is up, blocking us from the driver. We’re alone.

“Explain yourself,” he orders. His voice harsh in the space. The glamour practically simmers with the energy he’s giving off. I design a few glours a year myself, but not quite of this caliber. As impressive as it is, it’s distracting me from tracking his emotions.

Or I’ve just never seen him as angry as this.

“Can you turn it off?” I ask, trying not to dwell on his anger.

Stoneheart frowns. “Turn what off?”

I wave my hand to encompass all of him. “The glamour.”

He narrows his eyes. “I’d think that this appearance would be more comfortable for you. People have accused my true form of being intimidating.”

“I’d rather face the real you no matter how intimidating,” I whisper. I told myself that I’d be strong in the face of opposition to my plans, but it’s hard now that I’m so close to him to disregard the influence he has over me.

There’s an insidious part of me that still wants to please him.

Stoneheart keeps his gaze on mine as he twists one of his many rings. When it clicks, the illusion falls away. His wings hold tightly to his form, but his size is formidable. He is very intimidating, and I’m regretting asking him to remove the glamour, but not because I’m afraid of him.

My body hums, I press my thighs together against the gathering heat there. It’s unfortunate that an angry, mean Stoneheart really does it for me.

His nostrils flare, undoubtedly picking up the scent of my interest, but he doesn’t make any move to answer it.

“Stella,” he says, breaking me from my trance.

Oh yeah, he's waiting for answers, not about to rip my clothes off and call Ben in to toy with me. Pity.

"This is my territory too," I say. "I'm going to help look into these disappearances. I can't just stay up in my workshop. These people need to see me. Need to know that I care."

"And how can you help?" he asks, the roiling anger under his surface pauses for my answer.

"They had one of my charms."

Wards are expensive, and most are charged by the presence of the occupants. How many of the people who have been missing months or years had wards that were as undisturbed as this family's but weren't noted because they were drained by the time Stoneheart's people started investigating?

"I think fae magic of some sort could be sneaking past active wards," I say.

He stiffens. "That's possible?"

"I've known someone with fae blood to have the ability," I say, keeping it vague. Katarina's ability is a secret. "I won't know until I do more investigating."

Stoneheart's frown is a fearsome thing. A part of me thinks he's going to whisk me away to the Firefly and lock me in my workshop, but he doesn't, and I'm going to spend too much time later wondering why I'm disappointed that he's not as protective of me as Kalos is of Katarina.

Instead, the gargoyle sighs and slips off one of his rings and slides it onto my thumb. It barely fits, but I gasp, my fingers stroking the warmed metal as my heart lurches. Sensations clamor to the forefront.

It's captivating. *He's* captivated. By something...I push the first suspicion of what down for now. I won't make the assumptions I did our first night together.

The silver ring has a Celtic design in the side. Under the emotion it carries is a woven purpose that I frown and try to decipher.

Stoneheart pauses like he's regretting gifting me the ring. Is it because it's so valuable or because it has so much of his essence on it? The hesitation disappears faster than I can define it, and he speaks. "If you're going to be wandering around the territory, you will wear that. It will keep

people from being able to be successful in long-range attacks. You will also start combat training—”

“I’m not really athletic,” I say, blinking in surprise. And what can I really do against someone who can turn into a lion? Though to be fair, most shifters don’t fight in their animal forms, something about their animal selves lacking the same motivations as their human selves. But they are faster and stronger.

Stoneheart’s eyes narrow, and he continues, ignoring me. “*And* you will take a real bodyguard with you.”

“Ben’s a bodyguard—” I start.

He scoffs. “I picked Ben because of his skills of being a companion to you and his abilities, not because his presence will stop an assassin in their tracks.”

I arch my brow. “You picked Ben to get in his pants.”

“And in yours. Are you complaining?” he asks on the edge of snapping his teeth at me.

Am I? “So, I have your permission to work on this problem?”

“I didn’t think you needed it.” Stoneheart’s eyes glitter in a way that I think is respect before he looks away. “Keep Silas up to date with your progress.”

I nod, a little breathless that he’s giving me what I’m asking for so easily. Even if there was that comment about training. That’s definitely not going to hold when whoever he selects to train me realizes how useless I am at it. “Thank you.”

The thick silver of the ring keeps trying to catch my attention with that heady flavor I can’t quite make out without some heavy meditation sessions.

“It does seem that I’m the one giving all the gifts recently and receiving none,” Stoneheart muses. The tone of his voice isn’t quite right. There’s that underlying tension that sounds like...*jealousy*?

I freeze when it clicks. Last night, after Stoneheart gave me the labradorite, and I gave Ben the charm his energy changed. Each move and harsh order brimmed with it. But it wasn’t from sharing me, it was that Ben received something from me, and Stoneheart didn’t.

Did me giving Ben a gift signify more than I realized?

Have I hurt Stoneheart's feelings? That should be impossible, but I think I have.

I clear my throat. "I seem to remember a demon on his knees for you. Wasn't that a gift?"

Stoneheart's expression is blasé. "We both know he was on his knees for you."

After days in this gargoyle's presence, the edifice covering his emotions cracks. I want to run my fingers down every hint, but that's the Stella before our wedding night. The one who wanted something more with Stoneheart and got burned.

But it doesn't mean that I can't have a taste.

I lean forward and press my lips to his. The contact makes me feel reckless and alive even though it's a chaste kiss that he doesn't deepen. I pull away, and he's watching me like one would a wild animal. Cautious even as his tongue licks away my flavor.

My body hums with shame that I've unintentionally hurt his feelings, but the dark part of me that enjoys the grittier parts of these emotions takes notice and wants to flex. Just a little bit.

"And what about me going down on my knees for you?" I slide off the seat, and I kneel before him. "Is that a worthy gift?"

"Stella," he growls. The gray tone of his skin darkens on his cheeks. "This isn't the time—"

"I want to show my appreciation," I say, and it's true. He's a conundrum that I want to tackle. Other than the humiliation of the first night, he's been...if not generous, accommodating. And this might be a little more for me than it is for him.

My hands move to his kilt. I expect him to stop me, but he doesn't. I undo the enclosures, exposing his cock.

I suck in a shaky, surprised breath. He's already so hard. The bulbous shape at the bottom of his shaft that is his knot is an angry purple. His scent causes my mouth to water, and the expression on his face is almost as fierce as when he discovered me on the city street.

"So would this be an adequate gift?" I ask softly, my fingers sliding softly up his heated skin. The touch is a tease for both of us.

This isn't submitting, not really. Or that's what I tell myself anyway.

“Perhaps,” he says, seemingly unaffected, but my fingertips burn against his throbbing cock.

“Your body seems like it wants this, but I’ll stop if you want me to,” I say, my tone careless but breathless at the same time.

“Do you want me to admit I’m like this every time I catch scent of your arousal? Would that make it easier to try and manipulate me?” he snarls.

Is that what he thinks I’m doing? I guess that makes more logical sense than that being around him does things to me.

“I don’t want to manipulate you.” The confession is hushed, and my body is pulsing in time with his. *I want you*. It’s a confession that doesn’t need to be voiced but keeping it a secret helps me feel safer in this type of play, so the words don’t escape me.

“Then suck me, wife. Give us both what we want.” The growl to his words causes my core to contract, and I nearly whimper in need but follow his order.

I take him into my mouth, and we both moan. The bitter tang of precum and the leashed violence of his flesh against my tongue makes me squirm.

He grips my hair, pulling at the roots in a way that shakes the boundaries I’ve built between us. He hums in satisfaction as I allow him to direct my pace and push against the back of my throat.

“So pretty and happy with your mouth full of me,” he says.

My cheeks burn, and my body eases against my permission to the part of myself that he expertly handled before, that wants to be handled. My eyes glaze as I take him deeper, falling into the delight of following his orders.

His words are almost a purr. “You’re so wet from this that I bet if Ben were here, you’d beg for him to fill you up.”

I gasp, but the grip he has on my hair doesn’t let me take much of a breath before his cock is painting my tongue with more precum. My legs shake and need has me pushing my panties down to my knees to touch myself. My pussy is so wet that I can’t help skating past my clit to sink my fingers inside of myself so I have something to clutch around.

He presses deep in my throat until I gag and nearly come from the way my body tightens. I whimper, but Stoneheart doesn’t let up.

“Easy, sweet firefly, don’t take more than you can handle.” He lectures me like his grip isn’t what is pushing me forward. “I can hear how wet you are. Will you beg me to let your demon fuck you when we meet with him again? Will you even last that long?”

I make a small sound of frustration. My impatience and self-preservation need this to end because I’m enjoying it too much. I’ve heard enough rumors and witnessed Ben’s action last night, to know what he needs to come. I force my fingers leave me and grip both hands around the spongy flesh at the bottom of his shaft.

I test the give of his knot in my hands, and Stoneheart stiffens. My mouth softens around him at the thought of how this part of him would feel inside me. I don’t even know if it would fit, and it’s so hard. There’s some give to it, but it would really require my body to stretch to accept it.

I squeeze the knot, wanting my reward and for this gargoyle to shatter like I have multiple times for him.

“Harder,” he snarls under his breath. “It would be a fight for your body to accept my knot. So tight that you’d make me lose my mind.”

I squeeze as hard as I can moaning at his imagery. Fuck. I want that. I want him to be pressing hard for this part of him to lock inside me. Stoneheart’s grunt is the warning I get before my mouth fills with his release. I swallow and lick away the remnants, a little punch drunk even though I haven’t achieved any release yet.

Stoneheart lifts me from the floor of the car and rips away the panties tangling my legs before positioning me to straddle him.

I gasp at the contact of my bare pussy sliding against his spit-soaked cock. My hands clutch his muscled shoulders, and I rock my hips without meaning to. The pleasure at the slide takes my breath away.

It would be so easy to slip his still-hard cock inside me, but Stoneheart doesn’t allow me to move much with the grip he has on my hips.

My mind chants obscenities, and my vision blurs.

One of his claws releases the grip he has on my hip and traces over the neckline of my dress. I blink and look down at the chain and medallion he’s toying with almost without thought.

It’s my charm that wards against pregnancy. Mine is simple for a charm maker, a symbol stamped disk, but the gold hums well against my skin. He knows the significance, it’s commonplace in our world.

It would be so easy to let him inside me, to beg for it. He could fuck me in this back seat, and there would be no physical repercussions. But how far would I let his glinting eyes take me? Would I be inviting the war inside my body instead of just between the two of us? Would he shred my soul as surely as my peace of mind?

Do I care?

I can barely breathe. He lets me roll my hips against him, and the cascade of sensation has my head tilting back.

"I bet you ache to feel me inside of you." His words are hypnotizing. "Your cunt is so slick like it wants to stretch to take me."

"Fuck," I say out loud rather than just chanting in my head. I look down at the mess I'm making on his cock. His cum and mine mix stickily against my inner thighs, and his knot is shiny with lubrication.

This is it. I'm going to fuck my husband because if I don't, I'm going to combust.

"Do you want that?" he taunts. "For me to leave you filled with my seed so no one will doubt who owns you?" Stoneheart's pale gaze is dark with promise.

I freeze, and my body cries out in denial as my brain catches up. His hard cock pulses against my clit, but that word ruins this. *Own*.

Maybe if our past wasn't already full of wounds I would enjoy being *owned*, belonging to someone.

But that's not what this gargoyle is offering.

"You don't *own* me." My words leave me on a rasp.

Stoneheart's eyes get dangerously intent, as if he'd like nothing more than to disprove that, but I've found my boundary, and it's not moving even for this devil.

"I've given you permission to have a claim on me. If you want to own something, adopt a plant," I say.

His eyes flash at my words, like he wants to thrust inside me and prove me wrong, but I stand by my words. It doesn't make a difference if I have his mating mark or if he fills me up like he's threatened.

I'm a person. I may have been instrumental in a trade for peace, but I won't be owned like an object to be discarded.

And because I don't know when I'll next be close to him, my thumb traces over his lips. They're so soft compared to how unforgiving

everything else about him is. They twitch under my touch, and I pull away, unable to interpret the hard look on his face.

“Well played, wife.” His cool words contrast with his burning cock against me.

I clench my jaw, coming back to our odd stalemate where I stumble around this gargoyle. I pull out of his arms. My body is angry at the interrupted release, but the burn of winning this round is vibrant if bitter.

“Thank you for my gift,” he says as I fall back into the seat beside him, trying to ignore the spike of embarrassment and the wetness between my thighs.

I have nothing to be embarrassed about. I wanted to taste him, and I did. If he wasn’t so intolerable or just kept his damn mouth shut, I’d have enjoyed an orgasm that would have blurred the lines between us.

As it is, my body is left disappointed.

“Much better than what I was going to ask for,” he adds when I don’t respond.

I freeze in my process of pulling my dress down and wondering where my underwear went. The awkwardness and curiosity rushes back faster than my brain can come online. “What were you going to ask for?”

Stoneheart shrugs and does up his kilt again, hiding his fearsome cock. “I would have settled for you calling me by my name. You do know it.”

Remy. I swallow, and my blush is hot. How is he always able to knock me off my axis?

Finally, I lean back into the seat, facing forward and abandoning the search for my underwear. So what if someone else finds it? The people here want us fucking like rabbits, right?

“I’ll have to add that to the list of the other gifts I’ll be giving,” I say primly. “But it’s rather low on the list. I currently like the other recipients more than you.”

“And what sorts of gifts do you have in mind?” he asks, suspicion loud in his question as if he’d rather claim all my gifts for himself.

I evade my urge to dissect that and focus on my new goal instead.

I only need to figure out how to accomplish something that’s never been done before. This territory needs to believe it’s protected, and I finally know how I’m going to serve that.

“Well, husband,” I say, not ready to delve into the quagmire of my emotions that come with speaking his name, nor do I want to satisfy his wish. “I’m going to make charms that protect against fae magic.”

REMY

STELLA LAUGHS at something the man facing her says, and it takes effort not to march over to the other side of the room and commit violence. Her cocktail dress is a shimmery blue, and it wouldn't match the blood spatter if his hand gets any closer to resting on her arm like he's twitching to do.

"You're definitely filling the role of a possessive mate swimmingly, but try not to threaten to rip anyone's arms off tonight," Silas says. "This is supposed to be about the two of you showcasing that you are not Lorenzo. Ariel went to a lot of effort to organize this get-together."

"I wouldn't threaten to rip off someone's arms." I'd do it happily without warning. The warning not to touch is the wedding ring on my wife's finger.

Silas rolls his eyes at my glower, but he's right. Ariel Leonid did go to a lot of trouble organize the entertainment and to invite as many business owners and people in positions of power as would attend this...did she call it a soiree? Luckily, it's not a ball. She'd wanted to plan a ball.

The purpose is to set people at ease, and it seems to be working.

Every time someone is brave enough to approach me, they inhale, and their shoulders ease at the mix of my scent with Stella's. She'd marked me up so well the other day in the town car that even a shower hadn't cleansed her from my skin.

It's not like I wanted her scent gone, we sleep in the same bed for that reason, but it is distracting to desire her so much and have her be still so resistant.

The moment when she chose to touch me in the town car was pivotal. I don't even regret the way it ended. My desire to consummate our marriage wars hard in me, but this push and pull with her is a pleasure all its own.

I will own her, and she'll beg me for it.

The only comfort I have in being across the room from Stella is that Ben stands behind her, his eyes narrowed at whoever is flirting with our woman.

Connors is placed against the wall near them. An actual bodyguard to look after my dreamer of a wife and her methodical demon. The gods know that neither of them is skilled in combat. A fact that will be rectified. They have a standing training appointment with Fiona and Connors every morning much to my wife's complaint that she prefers quiet and coffee to sweating before the sunrises.

Fiona reports that Ben is a quick study, but Stella's abilities aren't promising. I hope that she never needs the skills the cat shifter is trying to push on her, but I'm a gargoyle of contingency plans.

Silas makes a sound of acknowledgment, distracting me from watching my wife get to know the other guests.

I turn and blow a breath. "Kalos, what a surprise you could make it."

The dragon's lips curl into something resembling a smile. "I'd never leave an ally hanging in the wind. Especially one making eyes at my second-in-command."

Silas blinks in surprise, but I don't outwardly show mine.

"Is he really your second-in-command if he spends more time in my territory than yours?" I challenge and feel Silas glaring at me.

Ben has been working with Stella on the issue of crafting charms that can stand against fae magic near constantly since the revelation of how people were being taken. He even found a fae within the territory who can instruct her.

They've begun the preparations, but with my current investigation and tasks managing the territory, I've not had a moment alone with both of them since the night in the library.

When I arrived home last night to relieve Ben of his position, Stella was asleep in the chair I'd picked for her workshop. Even with her apparent drained state, I'd been tempted to demand he stay so I could take from him what I'm owed.

His breath had caught in the dim light the moment I'd contemplated it. He knows he'll pay for allowing Stella to be vulnerable to attack in her investigation after I put my trust in him, but I spared him last night.

I'm enjoying prolonging his unease.

The grin Kalos gives me now is all fangs. "I hope you realize how valuable our allyship is to me to part with him for so long."

I narrow my eyes. The dragon knows I'm after the demon and, for some reason, isn't warning me off.

Kalos continues, "But I will tear you apart if you don't have a care in your courtship."

My insides freeze. *Courtship*. I don't live in a clan as other gargoyles do. I cast aside the traditions of my upbringing when I left that life, but what I've done to manipulate Ben is similar to courting.

To an outsider, the ends would appear the same, but creating a clan is not my intention.

"He'd be a valuable addition anywhere he went," I say without commitment. "Where is your mate?"

Kalos arches a brow. "I'm not bringing my pregnant mate into contentious territory, ally or not."

I nod, my eyes on Stella again. "And she just accepted that decision?"

Stella would fight me on that front even if she were expecting. I'm not ignorant to the whispers of the territory hoping that she pops out an heir. I've never needed to breed someone to stabilize a territory before, and my wife is more than a brood mare for political gains.

But the idea of claiming her that way...affects me.

That and the way her scent is sweetening with the approach of her fertile time is distracting.

Kalos huffs a laugh. "Katarina cares for my peace of mind. It's what comes from not treating your mating like a tactical game."

My lips twitch at the targeted statement. "I wouldn't know how that is."

Stella gives back as much sharpness as she takes from me, and there's something delightful about that. Surprisingly, Ben's presence adds to the experience.

Kalos nearly rolls his eyes. We are two leaders, comparable in influence and power. We are similar in many ways, but he obviously

doesn't see the joys in courting chaos. I enjoy predictability in my scheming as much as the next strategist, but Stella does add a fire to life.

I may not be able to soften enough to be what she needs, but I can enjoy the blaze.

"I see your host invited Lobo." Kalos changes the subject, nodding to the stiff man who Ariel is currently trying to chat with. "It's a surprise that he came."

Now my lips purse in annoyance. I don't like the wolf shifter who manages the territory a city over, and the feeling is mutual.

"It's better to keep an eye on those who were allied with Lorenzo, don't you think?" I ask. I'm also surprised Lobo is here. His name is on the list of territory leaders who both have fae gate access and a history of not caring much about the rarer kinds of paranormal individuals. His predecessor's bias toward wolf shifters was obvious, and Lobo has done nothing to remedy that.

"It's his uncle on the Council who is running the current shadow campaign against me," Kalos says with a careless gesture.

"McConnell?" I ask. There are multiple wolf shifters on the Council, but McConnell has been the most adamant that Kalos is a loose cannon who needs to be put down. I tilt my head. "They've kept their connection quiet."

Kalos nods. "The better to appear impartial. I imagine that if the Council finds your ownership of the territory invalid, then McConnell would find a way to have his nephew take over."

I try not to grit my teeth at the suggestion that such a thing would happen. The insult would be galling and would put Stella in danger.

"There are those who fear they would give the territory to Frank Leonid," I add. My people have kept their ears open to the whispers here. I may not allow myself to be influenced by the masses, but fear bears watching. It distorts one's morals, makes them unpredictable.

Kalos snorts. "All Lobo has to do is make sure Frank is unavailable, and he could make his petition. For the good of stability."

I roll my eyes, my tone as wry as his. "For the good of stability."

I'm starting to get annoyed by these buzzing insects of opponents. I'd much rather focus on entrapping my wife and demon, but the territory must be secured.

Protection is my role, and I will not fail it.

A man sidles up to where Ben is in front of the refreshments and brushes against his body as if on accident, flashing my demon a smile when Ben turns toward him with a frown.

I trap the growl in my chest but stand up straighter.

“I must bid my farewell, as I am missing my mate, and you are needed elsewhere,” Kalos says, his eyes alight with amusement. “I won’t keep you from staking your claim.”

The crafty dragon sees too much. He won’t fight for Ben’s loyalty and will deserve when the demon chooses me over him in the end.

I’m across the room before Silas can hiss for me to control myself, and Ben turns away from the man who was obviously trying to proposition him.

I glare at the man, and his smile drops before he stumbles away and back into the crowd.

My demon. My instincts crow at beating back a challenger. Stella places a hand on my arm, smiling but ending the conversation with who I recognize now as being the mayor.

He bends his head in respect. His obvious relief that Stella and I appear for all intents and purposes to be a happily newlywedded couple cools my ire at him making my wife laugh.

“I find I need some fresh air, wife. Shall we take a stroll?” I ask.

BEN

STONEHEART IS TESTY TONIGHT. It's not like he's usually sunshine and daisies, but the way he'd glared down the man who'd tried to strike up a conversation with me puts him much closer to broken glass and feral dogs than his usual storm clouds and thunder.

Which doesn't bode well for me.

Stella easily agrees to be led out of the overcrowded room. I move to follow them on instinct but halt. There's no reason for me, Stella's "bodyguard," to go with them. The farce of my position became apparent with the addition of Connors as a bodyguard, but we've been too busy troubleshooting the fae issue for me to be offended.

Stoneheart's gaze narrows as if daring me to stay back, and I find my feet moving with them.

My ears burn as whispers rumble from the surrounding people. I can't imagine what they are saying, that's incorrect, the more salacious of them are wondering about my inclusion with the couple. Is my presence for Stoneheart or Stella? A few will guess for both.

I don't know how to feel about how open he's being about the arrangement. The ability to not leave my scent or take on either of theirs has been an unexpected boon. I can only imagine how awkward it would be to walk around a room of shifters with his scent stamped over me like Stella does.

Where the scent mark on her is a relief to them, it would be scandalous on me.

Stoneheart doesn't lead Stella outside and instead moves down the cheery hallways of Ariel's home. The house is a grand place passed down through the generations. It had been where her parents had lived before their deaths.

The décor is traditional and stately with a few framed portraits that Stella would be surprised to discover are her ancestors.

I don't quite understand Ariel Leonid's motivations enough to trust her implicitly. There are gaps in my knowledge of what occurred with Stella's birth that draw more questions. For how helpful Ariel is being now and how sincere she was when meeting Stella, she served the territory under her brother for years.

The hallway opens up into a larger space. The conservatory is mostly glass with plants around to dampen the reflections of sound and create a pretty scene of fairy lights and dark greenery mixed with white and pink flowers.

There are forward facing chairs set up for a performance. The diamond of the curated room is the baby grand piano, and for a moment, it pulls my attention away from the couple who turn my need for calm on its head.

"Are we supposed to be in here yet?" Stella looks around for the staff that set up the room, but the three of us are alone.

The gargoyle leads Stella to the front of the room. I follow them, my attention split between them and the piano.

"The musical performance will take place after drinks. We have time yet. Ariel made sure to let me know that if we needed a moment, to take advantage of the space, and there would be no interruptions." Stoneheart's words are light but suggestive.

Stella groans, dropping her hand from his elbow to explore the space. "That woman is obsessed with our sex life."

"She's obsessed with creating stability," I add, my hand hovering over the keys of the piano to tease myself. The anticipation of the surface of the cool keys that would yield warm notes of music is a foolish thing to let affect me when I need to be focused on the maneuvering of these two. "It makes sense. Every aspect of the territory runs smoother when there is a belief that there isn't going to be a war."

"Or that people aren't disappearing from their beds," Stella says.

I make a sound in agreement. Lorenzo was operating on borrowed time, but he benefited in the instinct of a population to move with the herd. If a calf goes missing, it doesn't affect the overall feeling of safety. Everyone is aware of the dangers of our world, the proverbial wolves on the edges. It makes them ignorant of when the predators surround them.

There's no sheet music. The pianist is no doubt mingling with the rest of the guests. Hopefully their talent is more authentic than the wincing smiles of the rest of the people in the territory. Even I sense the uneasiness of people, and I can't scent emotions like Stoneheart undoubtedly can.

I'm not as convinced as Stella is that she will be able to make wards that are effective against fae magic and, even if she can, if that will be enough to stop the stampede if something sets people off.

"Do you play?" Stella asks, interrupting my musings, her eyes bright in curiosity as she leans on the side of the instrument.

"I enjoy it." I shrug, ignoring the imposing gargoyle coming up behind me like a circling shark.

"I think it's more than that," Stoneheart murmurs. His pale gaze peers into my soul and sees the truth there. He's standing too close for me to hide anything from him. His tail slides against my calf, beseeching me to speak.

"It's orderly," I admit. The gargoyle's expression doesn't change as his tail entwines around my leg, the tip stroking my sensitive inner thigh pulling more words from me. "The study of it following rules cultivated through the centuries, but it's also swayed by the soul." I can barely breathe. "And chaos."

His lips curve in satisfaction, and there's the barest brush of his tail against my cock before he pulls away. "Play for us."

I bite my lips. Nerves patter an odd rhythm in my chest. After expecting the axe to come down since agreeing to take Stella to a crime scene, it seems that Stoneheart has selected his method of payback.

I promised myself that I'd give him what he'd request because I do owe him. He entrusted me with Stella. I followed the words of the directive and not the meaning, and it caused him worry.

Because Stoneheart cares much more for Stella than he allows himself to show.

"I don't—" I break off, not even knowing how to voice the sentiment.

I do owe him, but not this.

As with many things with Stoneheart, he doesn't need my words to read me.

He tuts. "You don't want to play for us."

My shoulders ease at the simple statement, and I nod.

Of course he doesn't stop there. That would be too painless. Stoneheart continues. "This is a part of your heart, and you think that by not sharing it with us, that it won't be tainted after you leave?"

Stella ducks her head but not before I see the flash of hurt there, and it strikes me as surely as an arrow. The toxic shame of causing her to pain doesn't stop what he says from being true though.

"Yes," I say softly, my exhale shakes.

Stoneheart leans toward me, his face near mine.

"I'm sorry to inform you that nothing in your life will escape what's happening between the three of us. Tell me that the next time you sit before ivory keys you won't think of this moment and how you denied us." His breath brushes over my lips. "Tell me that you won't regret that more."

His words are scratches against glass. A melancholy memory of future regrets and a path I don't want to trek but yearn for all the same.

It's not Stella's rosy nipples and pussy that pulls me in this time. There's no denying that the moment I break, it's for Remy Stoneheart and his taunting.

"You don't sound very sorry," I say, and when he grins, I kiss him, surprising the both of us.

Instead of freezing in the moment like I do, he takes my shaky melody and builds on it, adding teeth and texture and the chill of the metal in his lip. He tastes like midnight promises, future hurt, but not an ounce of regret.

He pulls me away from the piano keys even as my fingers itch to share another part of my soul with these two. I break the kiss to say that I've changed my mind, but there's a hunger in the air that halts the words in my throat.

"If you won't play, then perhaps it's time for your punishment," Stoneheart says, his claws tickling the back of my neck before he takes my

hair in an unforgiving grip and pulls the piano key cover down. The sound a soft slam to punctuate the statement.

“Punishment?” Stella asks, her voice sounds a little raw, but her cheeks are flushed.

“Yes, sweet wife. He put you in danger.”

“Stoneheart—” She cuts off on his glare, but I can hardly track the interaction.

The grip on my hair *hurts*. My heart races, and the mix of reactions in my body are intense and disorienting.

But the sensation also distills inconvenient facts.

Stoneheart is right. I won’t be leaving this relationship with any part of myself unscathed.

And I need what he’s offering.

“Yes,” I breathe. “Please.”

Stoneheart’s face shifts, taking on an avid light, but when he speaks, the words are soft, and he strokes my cheek with the sharp edge of his talon. “Beautiful demon who needs to shatter, I’ll take care with you.”

He turns toward Stella. “You were left wanting in the car. I have a present.”

The hand not in my hair slides down my body, pressing against my cock. The appendage only grows harder as he increases the pull on my scalp. His eyes snap back to me, and I know he’s noticed.

I swallow at the beat of silence. Stoneheart increases the tension of my hair to a level of pain that is just before damage, and I gasp, my cock jerking at our position.

“Were you aware that you enjoy pain?” His voice is serious now. He eases his grip and assumes the role of directing us. It’s the same role he claimed with the seduction in the library too. Inviting, but calculated. Treating this experience as something that requires care and exacting actions.

Giving over the responsibility of my actions is as intoxicating as the pleasures he offers.

He waits for me to formulate my answer. My cheeks burn.

“A little when I’m stressed. Never with someone else.”

Stoneheart stills. “Ever outside of a sexual context?”

I struggle to answer because it's not something someone admits to. Working out until pain takes away the constant buzzing in my mind, snapping a rubber band on my wrist, holding my breath underwater until my lungs scream at me.

I have the systems in place in my life to keep me from getting to the point of craving something more destructive than that.

"Ben," Stoneheart growls when I don't answer, and the rumble of the sound moves through my body. Stella gasps, obviously as affected as I am.

"Sometimes," I confess. "But nothing damaging."

"You will come to me for pain," he decrees as if it's an order that I'll be following for the rest of my life rather than until this ill-planned arrangement ends.

I can't give him that promise.

"You said you had a present for me," Stella says when I don't immediately agree to Stoneheart's demand. Even as her words are sassy, her eyes are soft with understanding.

Stoneheart gives me a look that says the topic isn't settled but welcomes Stella into the fray.

"I'm feeling kind tonight and do so enjoy giving you gifts," he says. Something passes between them as Stoneheart leisurely strokes my hardness through my pants. His grip is soft for all his forceful personality and the delicious pain he's giving me.

Stella's eyes narrow, and Stoneheart's grin is sharp.

He continues, "You really haven't yielded the benefits of being with two men yet. The library was a delight, but wouldn't you rather be fucked properly?"

Stella's lips part, but her surprise doesn't stop her from gravitating toward us.

"Wouldn't you rather be filled by your lover's cock?" Stoneheart purrs, and I curse when he tightens his grip around me.

"That's a generous gift." She glances through her lashes at the two of us, and I'm mesmerized. "I'm sure it would serve your purpose for us to be caught in the act here. And even if you're fond of displaying me naked to the territory, it's riskier for Ben."

Risky...it's hard to remember or care about that right now, but there's a hardness to her tone that brings me back to reality. Stoneheart shifts

some as if also arriving at the present, but he doesn't stop stroking my cock, doesn't let the bitter note in Stella's words derail his plans on gifting me to his mate.

"Serves *our* purpose, and that's not my plan here." Stoneheart shrugs. "The scent we leave will do enough for that. I will not expose you further."

Even with how casual his statement is, the air holds a flavor of regret that Stella seems to finally believe. My heart beats painfully against my ribcage at being between these two. Having them talk about me as if I'm merely a plaything is a hot lash of desire inside me.

"This is for your pleasure." His lips twitch. "*Our* pleasure."

Stella's reticence melts into curiosity, and she presses close enough that her tangy scent has my mouth watering already even if I'm confused. I'm missing something crucial here.

"How is this a punishment?" I ask, feeling faint.

Stella kisses me softly, not waiting for Stoneheart's permission and distracting me from the gargoyle who has me in such a firm grasp.

The moment our lips touch reaches to the depths of my soul and grabs hold. It's a chaste brushing of lips but deepens almost without intention. Stoneheart releases my hair, and I'm lost to her.

I've tasted the very core of this witch, but this intimacy is different, tentative and pining. The heart has no time limit. It doesn't know the difference whether it yearns for months or years, but the revelation that her heart mirrors my own changes the cadence. It aligns us, reciprocating our needs and wishes back and forth, never ending.

The kiss with Stoneheart was about power and intrigue. This moment between Stella and me is binding, leveling. It's a question with a resounding answer.

She would've deemed me worthy of her.

She'd have kept me.

The certainty is a stab to the chest. We would have ended up mated if not for the political need for her marriage. I dodge the grief of that by deepening the kiss, diving into the air of lust to embrace reality.

My hands skim up her thighs to grab her hips, pulling her forward to grind on where Stoneheart's fist keeps me from moving. The action widens my senses again to include the maestro of the moment.

Stoneheart growls and moves us so that Stella's ass presses against the piano cover. His body surrounds me, his hardness burning against my backside causes me to gasp into his wife's lips.

He stops his methodical strokes to release me from my pants. The first feel of his callused hand against the sensitive skin there has me groaning. I forget about things like getting caught, punishments, and regrets. All that I can focus on now is Stella in front of me and the gargoyle behind me orchestrating this.

My hands travel over Stella's body, pushing her dress up before boosting her to sit on the piano key cover. Her nails dig into my shoulders, and our kiss goes from gentle to hungry.

In my rush, I nearly miss Stoneheart's words.

"Because you won't be coming."

I break the kiss and turn my head toward him, startled. The glint in his eyes has a greater pressure building in my spine.

Stoneheart's grin is vicious.

"Still want to fuck my wife?"

STELLA

BEN'S EYES widen at Stoneheart's question. The gargoyle's expression is enough to make me want to run and hide or, rather, surrender.

He's enjoying himself, and his delight is terrifying.

I bite my lip and my lower body aches with need. *Please, please, please*, I silently and selfishly chant. If Stoneheart was focused on tormenting me instead of Ben, he'd make me beg aloud.

As it is, I get to enjoy the spectacle of him bringing Ben to his proverbial knees.

Oh, and assuming Stoneheart is really as kind as he's acting, I get fucked in the end. So, win-win.

Ben makes a gruff sound of frustration while a talon slips under the strap of my panties and snaps it. The back of Stoneheart's finger coasts over the edge of my pussy as it's exposed to the air of the conservatory, and if he weren't watching my reaction from the corner of his eye, I'd whimper.

Ben hasn't answered yet, his head falling forward and his gaze on the sight of his cock in Stoneheart's grip. The ruddy head oozes precum, and I tighten in anticipation. Ben's silence doesn't stop the gargoyle from dragging the demon's cock through my weeping folds. I gasp at the tease, and Ben curses.

Stoneheart spreads the mix of Ben and my wetness with a rough stroke before placing Ben's cock against my opening. I do whimper now and

catch Stoneheart's satisfied smile as my body parts easily with the press of the flared head of Ben.

"She's so very wet and ready for you. It would be a shame to waste it," Stoneheart croons into his ear. "Well, Ben?"

I bite my lip to keep from reacting, but it doesn't keep in the sounds of need from building in my throat. It would be so easy to pull him toward me by the grip I have on his lapels or to dissolve into begging, but I stay frozen for Ben to decide.

"Yes, damn you, but yes. Of course I want her." He gazes at me, the words reverberating with need and honesty.

"Then take her," Stoneheart growls.

There's something so exposing watching Stoneheart in this moment. He's so watchful even as he's pushing Ben to do what he wants. Like if he controls every aspect of the interaction, he can...protect Ben.

With the distance of this perspective, I realize that he did the same with me even during that first night. We were just too much in the thick of it when we came together for me to see it.

Like this, I forget he's a territory leader and when he schemed against me. He's less the Stoneheart I've battled with and more the Remy I wanted to marry even while being a stranger.

Ben cradles my cheek, bringing me back to the heat of him throbbing against me. All he'd have to do is tilt forward, and he'd be inside me.

"May I?"

I nod, impatient for him to be inside me, but Ben takes a breath and moves slowly. He rocks forward and sinks in part way. I clench around him, needing more, but he freezes and shudders. "Gods, you feel too good."

I try to keep still even though everything inside me is needing more. My hips squirm as Ben withdraws a dragging inch before pressing in again.

"More," I whisper.

"I don't want to hurt you," Ben mutters, but I'm past caring. I blink up at Stoneheart, knowing my request is on my face. Stoneheart's gaze is full of lust and satisfaction, waiting for me to beg.

Ben does another slow, shallow invasion, and I break.

“Please—” I start, but off on a cry, my eyes rolling back as Ben’s body crashes against me, crushing me against the piano. His hips flush against mine as his flesh throbs inside of me. *Full*. It’s all I can think. Full and thick.

I groan at the heavy feel of Ben filling me, but I am cut off by Stoneheart’s mouth devouring mine. He licks past my lips, stealing my sounds even as Ben curses.

“Fuck you, Stoneheart!” Ben moans against the skin of my shoulder.

The gargoyle’s mouth curves against mine, and he pulls away. “Sorry, I’m not nearly as patient for this as I thought.”

Ben’s face is frozen in a mixture of frustration and bliss. Stoneheart’s body grinds Ben’s body harder into mine.

“Will you fuck her properly now?” my husband asks, pulling Ben back enough that his cock slides almost all the way out of me. “She shouldn’t have to wait for you, she’s not the one being punished.”

Ben isn’t listening. His hips start moving as if he’s in a trance. Full, slow thrusts and halting retreats that make me pant and flex around him.

“She’s like a goddamn vise,” he breathes, not waiting for Stoneheart to ask him. “*Fuck*. So hot and wet.”

Ben’s next thrust is harsher, his body thudding against mine and making us both moan.

“Better,” Stoneheart growls, pulling me into a kiss as Ben starts to fuck me in earnest.

“Gods, Stella.” Ben’s teeth rake over the skin of my neck, and I make a surprised noise into Stoneheart’s mouth when he scrapes over my mating mark. It’s sensitive in a way I didn’t anticipate, and my whole body lights up.

“Slower,” Stoneheart breaks our kiss to coax, but Ben doesn’t listen, and I fall into the dual sensations of Ben moving inside of me and the grip Stoneheart has on the back of my neck.

Stoneheart mock sighs. “You’re only making it worse for yourself when you don’t listen to me.”

Before I can wonder what he means, he releases the grip he has on me and drops his hand to where Ben’s body meets mine, rubbing circles over my clit and causing me to arch as the beginning waves of climax start to gather.

Ben grunts and Stoneheart nips his earlobe, tutting.

Something moves between us, and Ben cries out, his face twists in agony. I lean back and see the end of Stoneheart's tail wrapped tightly around the base of Ben's cock. *Fuck*, the pain of it must be keeping him from climax.

"I said, slower," the gargoyle murmurs. "Watch her break for us. Feel her milk your cock."

Is that me he's talking about? It must be because both of their gazes are on me now. Stoneheart's is full of hunger and Ben's a tormented awe. The sensations build and layer under their attention.

Each stroke and touch expands the lava in my belly that all at once wants this to go on forever but greedily wants completion. I tilt back against the piano as Stoneheart's slippery thumb coaxes me past the point of no return. I come.

My lips part, and Ben's palm covers my mouth to keep in my scream from echoing against the glass ceiling.

Wave after wave of pleasure moves through me, and I gush around the demon inside of me.

"Fuck!" Ben shouts.

I blink, starting to come back to myself. I don't know why he muffled me if he's going to be as loud.

"A dream, isn't she?" Stoneheart asks.

Ben's body caves forward, shaking. I'd be worried about the torture he's going through, except his cock is hard, and he's not pulling away. He can disappear on a whim. This is where he wants to be.

Now that Ben can't race toward orgasm, he tries to slow his pace, but Stoneheart presses his hips into Ben's to keep each move inside me even. Each thrust sounds wet, and my cheeks burn. *Fuck*, he's making me make a mess.

Ben swears in rapid succession the words I'm usually saying.

"I can feel how badly you want to come," Stoneheart taunts. "Is it just to chase the physical sensation or do you want to paint her insides with your seed? Is that your secret desire? To show me how to mark up what's mine?"

Ben's eyes slam shut, and Stoneheart thankfully stops stimulating my clit to pull Ben's suit jacket and shirt away from his throat. Buttons pop

but the demon doesn't seem to notice. Stoneheart's teeth scrape against the skin exposed, and I watch with fascination as he mouths the spot where he'd left a claiming mark on me.

"I'll let you come for a price," the Devil says.

What's happening clicks.

Stoneheart wants to give Ben a claiming mark. My eyes widen in surprise, but my pussy tightens around Ben causing the demon to make another pained sound.

"Anything," Ben rasps.

Stoneheart's mouth opens to give him a proposition, but he straightens as if he's heard a sound, a look of annoyance crossing his face. He pulls Ben back against him. Ben lets out a desperate sound as his cock slides wetly from me.

"Fly away, shadow walker, before someone sees something that you'll regret." Stoneheart is all business now.

It takes Ben a moment to understand, but when he does, his gaze meets mine, and he disappears.

I try to move off the piano, but my limbs are noodles.

"Easy now, firefly," Stoneheart says, stepping into the space that Ben vacated. His hands stroke my arms in comfort. "They're at the end of the hall. I don't know if they plan on coming in here. We have time."

"That was a dirty play," I say.

Stoneheart doesn't try to pretend innocence. "That's the only type of play I make."

I tilt my head back on a relieved sigh that we aren't immediately going to be disturbed. The sensation of Ben against me, inside me, echoes as surely as the beat of my heart.

"What would it even mean for you to mark him?" I ask. Would they be considered mates too?

Stoneheart shrugs, not answering. Instead, he grips the bend of my knee and pulls my legs wider.

"You've made quite a mess." His lecturing tone is playful.

I look down and flush at the smears of my arousal on the piano cover. "Ben would be horrified."

He'd been so reverent about the instrument that it had stung that he didn't want to play piano for us. I understand why, but it still stung.

Stoneheart snorts. “Ben would be tantalized. You’ve christened an already impressive work of art.” Stoneheart sinks to his knees between my thighs. “But I vowed not to expose you.”

“Wha—” I cut off my words when he opens his mouth a breath away from where I’m exposed and *licks* the piano. I swallow as I follow each flick of his long-tapered tongue, my heartbeat sounding louder in my ears.

His gaze locks with mine as he finishes the task of licking away my mess. His brow arches, and I almost whimper.

“Allow me to clean you up?” he asks, and my toes curl. “We still have time before anyone interrupts us.”

I nod, not reflecting on the fact that I wasn’t even thinking of being discovered here. The last time he did this to me was right before his scheming came to light on our wedding night. Some core part of me wants to rewrite that memory.

It’s a mistake to allow myself to be taken in by my husband, but when we’re like this, I’m not thinking of his Machiavellian nature. In this context, his cruelty adds to the pleasure just as he’d given Ben the pain he craves.

I sigh in absolution as his mouth opens against me. His tongue curling to gather each remnant of Ben and my fucking. Can he taste him inside me?

I open my mouth to ask the question, to taunt the master at his own game, but Stoneheart gives one last flick to my clit before rising.

Denying me release.

My eyes widen as he takes my hand and pulls me to stand, pulling my dress down to drape how it should. I throb, and this gargoyle has the nerve to smirk at me.

“You’re such an asshole,” I say.

“Now don’t be angry. If I don’t leave you wanting, how else can I ensure you’ll abide my presence?”

“That makes no sense. If you never satisfy me, I don’t have a reason to want to fuck you.”

“Oh, I’ll satisfy you, wife.” His voice is dark even as his lips stay curved in triumph. “Don’t you worry about that, but I won’t give you something like that so easily and not here.”

Whatever words I was planning on saying get lost in that imagining, and I'm hit with a sudden craving to continue his game.

"Peace, wife, I keep my promises, but now we must go to work."

I nearly groan. Returning to a crowd of people while my body thrums with lust is not my idea of a good time. "We can't just go home? I'm sure we've already done enough to cause the good type of gossip."

"That's hardly showing your aunt gratitude for organizing this."

I glare. He's right. "You did this," I say, annoyed that his sly grin is making me wetter.

"I'll be sure to feel bad about it later," he says, his tone letting me know that he plans no such thing.

I roll my eyes and try and take a deep breath to suppress the arousal lighting my body. At this point, I'll need Ben around just to split Stoneheart's lethal attention.

Stoneheart eyes the piano. "I wonder if Ariel will sell this piece to me. I've become quite partial to it."

When the crowd moves to enter the conservatory it's to my bark of laughter, portraying us as the happy newlywed couple they'd have us be.

REMY

I'D ONLY MEANT to take a moment to check my messages, but instead find myself in the questionable position of watching my wife sleep. The chair I'm in next to the wall is well situated for the task even if it looks bland and is rather uncomfortable.

Ben had said she didn't care to spend time in the bedroom, and I see why. The room is wrong for our firefly. I'd meant to leave it for her to make decisions about the space, but the generic nature of it is beginning to grind. This room is meant to serve as our sanctuary, a place for rest and seduction.

I will remedy this. It's one thing that I can remedy. After all, I'd succeeded with the workshop.

She'd fallen into bed after we'd returned home last night, exhausted. The self-defense training, her attempts to craft charms against fae magic, and socializing with strangers proved too tiring to address in one day. And that's without accounting for the sex.

My mouth waters at the memory of her spread before us on the glossy piano, made only glossier by her slick arousal, and I sit back in the chair heavier, annoying my wings.

Stella makes a soft sound, and the sheets rustle before she settles again. The sun is just barely rising now. The light painting her face is soft, not enough to show the fire underneath, the chaos as Ben would surely call it.

It's her scent that's making it hard to leave. Nothing more than that. Biology wants me to mate my witch.

I'm not usually one to lie to myself, but this is easier.

The temptation to wake her with my tongue lapping at her nectar is gripping, but I hold back. My discipline suffers around her, but I'm not that far gone yet. She'd accept me, of that, I'm sure. She'd have given over her body to me last night even with the trace of Ben inside her.

But I'd prefer to be sure that Ben won't disappear once we don't need him to act as our go-between. I won't lose my queen's knight so carelessly.

And there is the small matter of her accepting my ownership. I breathe in her sweetness on the air, greedy for the eventual capitulation.

She inhales deeply, and suddenly we're watching each other. Her blue eyes are sleepy but quickly focus on me. We stare in silence.

A silent truce until a line forms between her brows.

Her gaze sharpens. "My mom extended her vacation."

My brows lift at the random seeming detail but nod. I imagine she's grateful for the reprieve. It would be messy to have Elena return in the midst of the unrest. Our mating is valid, but it still feels like something that can disappear as quickly as smoke. All it would require is a blowing huff from the Council.

To have to manage her mother at the same time would cause Stella stress.

"And it works out well for us," she echoes my thoughts and continues. "So well, that it's almost like it was planned, but I don't know how you would have pulled that off..."

I should smile and say something pithy about not controlling the universe, but not everything needs to be a scheme. And a part of me is tired of holding back my nature from her.

"It was rather simple actually," I say.

Apprehension fills her face. She didn't want me to confirm her suspicions. "Tell me."

"Carl works for me."

She purses her lips. "And you told him to romance my mom?"

"Of course not." That would have been an excellent idea, if more calculated than Stella would be able to stomach. "Carl was only directed to

watch out for her. When he inquired if he could court her, I gave my permission.”

Stella sighs in relief. “So he does have feelings for her?”

I snort. Since I first put him in place. The suspicion doesn’t leave her face, and my stomach sinks. My firefly is digging for things she may not be ready to know.

She sits up in bed. “That’s the thing though. I’ve known Carl for years. He’s helped me out a few times. Even going to bat for me on a Council issue once.”

She’s not asking a question, so I don’t respond. The silence falls again, but the oncoming disturbance brews until it breaks through.

“How long have you been watching me?” she asks.

I don’t hesitate to answer. “Since I first approached.”

She swallows, spinning the charmed ring I’d given her on her thumb. Ah, her affinity with metals exposed my lingering obsession. How sloppy of me.

“You’re captivated by me,” she says, again, not a question.

Captivated is a good word for it. Descriptive. Like a moth to her flame. She is a fluttering light in a world of strife. She is my firefly. Warmth stirs in my chest even as this is inconvenient.

“Clever witch,” I murmur.

“Why hide it?” Vulnerability seeps into her words. Those blue eyes have a certain type of yearning in them that I want to swallow whole, but it doesn’t change the facts.

“Because I still can’t be what you need,” I say without inflection.

“What does it matter if I’ve kept tabs on you?”

Her brows rise. “You watched me in my workshop. At my old place. You saw me fall asleep at my desk.”

I still. She’s put together much more than I figured.

“That corner needed a chair,” I say. Like it’s a simple thing that I’d watched her lit-up window from the roof of the next building over. Many times.

I can’t tell if she’s displeased. After all, I violated her privacy. She’d cleanly rejected my proposal, and instead of leaving it alone, I planted one of my most trusted men in her life. Against my better judgment, I *watched* her. I plotted ways to keep her even as I stayed away.

Lorenzo was always going to fall. The territory was going to be mine, but more importantly, Stella was always going to be mine.

Fate must have agreed because the way it all happened was a much cleaner solution than anything I had in the works.

Stella's expression is so very serious. "Why can't you be what I need?"

I swallow. She hadn't questioned that before, and I didn't realize then how much of a grace it was for her to not be surprised that I couldn't be the one to cater to her emotional needs. That I couldn't care for her heart.

But doesn't she deserve to know?

"I've borne the brunt of what happens to the vulnerable when the people they rely on allow themselves to be swayed by emotions." I try to keep the statement clean, direct. "And there are a lot of people who rely on me."

Stella stops spinning the ring. Her attention on me absolute. "Who hurt you?"

And in this moment, the fire in Stella's gaze is as mesmerizing as her pleasure the night before.

As if she would burn down a whole clan of gargoyles if I'd admit how they treated me. I was a burden to them, someone not worth the resources and definitely not worth having any space or possessions of my own.

I sigh. I have no wish or need for Stella to wage a war of revenge my behalf, so I focus on the important part of the story. "My father left me vulnerable. He gave his whole heart to my witch mother, and when she died, he crumbled."

The clan had been sure to detail just how weak he was to not only be half witch himself, but to fall in love with a witch so completely that he could not survive her passing.

"Crumbled?" she asks.

"He chose to sleep and never wake. It's the way gargoyles meet their end. They exist as statues until the elements break them down." From dust to dust.

"How old were you?"

Young. Too damn young to see the statue of my father along with the other elders of the clan, never to find the will to resurface from his slumber. Discomfort is tight in my wings, and I stand. "The details aren't important."

Her eyes are wide at my abrupt movement and something in my chest softens. I breathe through the inconvenient feeling while wanting to snap my teeth in frustration.

I cast off my reaction and continue. "I will not risk the people who count on me."

"I wouldn't ask you to. Truly." She bites her lip. "But some would argue that those types of strong feelings empower people."

She says that as if all love is built equally. I know the stirrings of my heart are not so wholesome as that. My emotions are destructive. I fear I've let this witch affect me too much already.

"Others may be different. But I know the weakness of my blood. We will continue as we began." I'm already distractingly preoccupied with her even if she's only now picking up the hints.

"Of course. You're up early," she says. It's a whisper like her throat is tight, and for the first time I realize that she may not appreciate that I always strive to leave before she wakes. "Did something happen?"

"We have a lead concerning the Sova family," I say.

Young Andrew has demonstrated a skill for this tracking work. I'll still shuffle him around, but his technical proficiency is something I'll be keeping a close eye on.

"That's good news." The tightness isn't completely gone, but relief is taking its place.

"It's just the two women. There's record of them passing through a fae gate in a different city," I say, not wanting her to get her hopes up. I keep my anger that it's a city in Lobo's territory to myself. "But I'm hoping we can find the children being held somewhere near to that gate. It takes much more work to smuggle children through fae gates than adults."

It's a time-sensitive task, not to mention everything else that must be done to continue the search for the women on the other side of the gate, and because my weakness had me admiring my prize while she slept, I'm delayed. I clench my jaw.

Stella dips her chin, sensing my intention. "Good luck. I hope you find them."

I turn with a nod. Not allowing myself the domesticity of a goodbye kiss. Ben will be here soon. Ben will be the one to care for our vibrant firefly.

People rely on my good sense. No matter how tempting it is, or how sad her blue eyes are, I will not soften for my wife.
I can't afford to.

STELLA

“FUCK YOU, YOU FUCKING FUCK,” I whisper to the coil of wire in my hands hot with my magic, ignoring Andrew’s shock and Connors’s lips pressed in mirth. The worktable in the back room of the bookshop is clear enough, but the space around it is cramped so there’s no avoiding the men around me.

Apparently, any time I’m outside the Firefly, I get two bodyguards. A fact I hadn’t known with Ben always being with me.

I focus on the little details to keep my mind from wandering. There are a few sticky subjects that I ignore as I attempt to weave my magic. Stoneheart’s departure this morning, Ben’s awkwardness...I take a deep breath, and the scent of old paper comforts me even as I scowl at the metal.

It’s better that Ben is absent. We haven’t had much time to discuss what occurred on my aunt’s piano, but every time my gaze meets his, I remember the sensation of his body stretching mine, the look of awe that couldn’t be suppressed by the pain that he so enjoyed. Stoneheart’s high-handed directions.

My husband wanting to place a claiming bite on my demon.

It’s very distracting.

Today is a rare day where Ben has been in and out, needing to check on some things in Kalos’s territory and making inquiries of other fae magic users. There aren’t many on this side of the gates, and they don’t exactly advertise if they still have the capability to use magic.

The fact he found Rowan at all is impressive.

The fae huffs a laugh at my cursing as he places a stack of ancient looking books on the other side of the worktable from me. He still has an hour before he opens to the public, and though he'd offered to shut down his business to assist me, there's not much for him to do after the first day we sat down and discussed the nature of fae magic.

I keep returning to work here because, even after that, I'm still struggling to comprehend how their magic system works. It seems that once anyone has decided on anything enough to put it down in a book, the magic changes. Almost like it is sentient.

Along with that super flexibility, a lot of spells seem mostly left up to chance. Rowan explained that the way the fae feel about fate and their place in the world coincides with the behavior of the magic.

In short, it's a mess.

"You're wanting it to be too orderly still," Rowan says, squinting at the wire in my hands.

"Orderly is not something anyone would call me," I grouse.

He'd been skittish when we'd shown up on his doorstep a couple of days ago, but he's eased since then. Perhaps understanding that we aren't Lorenzo and that we're not going to punish him for any crimes another fae has committed.

Rowan looks to be in his forties, and under his glamour, his green skin is flecked with green speckles that makes me wonder if he's related to a type of troll. He's tall but lacks the width a troll would have.

The fact that he can still manipulate magics outside of the fae realm and his appearance probably means that he was born here with a mixed heritage. From what I know, fae bloodlines are flexible with abilities and attributes skipping generations.

Every so often, you'll hear about a human with no knowledge of our world manifesting fae attributes. I'd never thought to wonder what happens to them until I met Katarina. She didn't know she was a witch for most of her childhood, and the discovery that fae blood is what gives her the ability to bypass wards only occurred recently.

"I don't know if it's possible to weave the magic tightly enough to nullify all the variabilities the magic can manifest as." I frown. I've tried a few methods that I thought of while waiting for Rowan to complete his

deep dive into research, and this was the one I thought might work. One can't very well pass through a ward if they can't use their magic, can they?

But there are infinite pathways that fae magic can take and trying to guard against all of them is overloading the capacity of the charm.

When we'd told Rowan our worries, he'd said that he hadn't heard of the ability of bypassing wards and would need some time to research it. Which is a fucking relief for the implications that witch magic is vulnerable to the fae, but that doesn't change the fact that people have been taken and the wards left intact.

And a certain dragon's mate has proved that it's possible to bypass wards.

There have been no new missing persons that we know of, but Fiona let slip during my training yesterday that the territory still feels on edge. I escaped her kind teachings this morning because she's a part of the team that is checking on the Sova family lead.

Rowan opens one of the ancient books in front of him and gestures to the symbol on the page. The writing isn't a language I understand, but the symbol looks like a family crest. Instead of an animal though, it's a plant.

"I've been as thorough as I can with the collection of books I have, but there was in fact one family line that had the ability to bypass magics." Rowan frowns at the yellowed page. "Their name is hard for me to pronounce, but it translates to roughly to Nightshade."

My heart sinks even though Katarina's existence attests it was possible all along. "So whoever is doing this, may have a Nightshade working for them?"

Rowan's scholarly expression flattens. "It's unlikely. They were systematically exterminated a few centuries ago. They pissed off the royal court. The kill order is still active for any stragglers, which by this time is mostly humans who manifest that ability."

I control my face. It's a good thing Katarina never went digging for family, and that she has Kalos's protection.

"But it's possible," I say.

Connors has been good with taking Ben's position in checking my assumptions through this process and interjects. "If that's the case, and this family is so rare, that's one person at most who would be invading these people's homes and subduing them without anyone being the wiser."

I frown. Some of the families taken had upward of four adults. One person would have to be very well-equipped.

Which makes it more unlikely.

“Is it possible we’ve gone the wrong direction with thinking this is a fae magic thing?” Andrew of the expressive face asks. This is the first time he’s loosened from his awkward stance since Ben left this morning.

I hum, considering. My mind did get stuck on fae magic because I know what Katarina can do. “You don’t think fae are involved?”

Andrew shakes his head. “We know they are, especially with tracking the Sova family. But it sounds like fae magic is finnick in the fae realm, let alone here.”

Rowan shrugs in agreement. “The fae can make spelled objects, similar to witch’s charms. Those are more stable, but it would be a considerable expense. Not to mention that it would utilize a spell that no one has ever made before.”

And if we don’t know how the charm functions, we wouldn’t be able to counter it. Another dead end, but I mull the details around in my head.

Andrew continues past Rowan’s doubtful expression, casting a wider net. “What if it’s not that they are bypassing the wards, what then? Could a witch spell do this? Or even glamour? Would a ward work if someone is in disguise?”

“A ward works based on intention. A disguise wouldn’t work against it. Can fae magic commingle with a ward and rewrite it?” I ask Rowan who shakes his head.

“I considered that when you approached me. I spoke to my brother about this project. He’s a ward master, and he confirmed what I suspected. Fae magic and the way we draw wards here have no chance of commingling. Wards are too meticulous of a magic.”

“And your brother knows not to spread this around?” Connors asks.

Rowan’s lips twitch. “He’s not a talkative one.”

“Your brother can craft wards and be fae?” I ask.

“Ah, no.” Rowan scratches his head. “Sorry, we’re half siblings. His mother is a witch.”

I sigh. Witch wards do not play well with anything. Even crafting charms to boost them requires a lot of skill.

One misplaced line on a ward, and the whole intention can change. I think on that, and we brainstorm some more, Andrew throwing in interesting questions since he's not very well versed in magic, but it all leads us back to the fact that we don't have enough information.

I wipe my hand down my face. "If I don't know how they are getting past wards, I can't make a counter. I've tried to craft a charm that can block fae magic, but it's not going well."

I wave a hand at the wire on the tabletop.

"Maybe just a ward booster would work?" Connors winces. "I know those are possible to make, and that would make people feel safer."

I shake my head. "But it wouldn't be real safety. Not if someone is bypassing wards altogether. The Sova family already had one of my charms on their ward."

"The appearance of safety is as important as actually securing the territory," Connors says.

I bite my lip, not wanting to admit defeat. I'll admit I was naïve when I proclaimed to Stoneheart my intention, but it feels right no matter how impossible it seems. I want to give people legitimate safety, not our best approximate guess.

"I'll think on it." I glare at the useless metal. "I just wish I had something more solid."

"Sometimes what we are able to do is all we can do," Andrew says, sounding as dejected as I feel. A malaise settles over the room, and we return to our tasks. Rowan trying to add energy with his readying bustle, and my bodyguards taking turns checking the boundaries of the bookshop.

I nearly chew through my lip while failing another attempt that fizzles and leaves a scorch mark on Rowan's table before coming to the conclusion that I'm done for the day. Trying to weave something into existence in which we don't know if it's possible is exhausting. The frustration itself of failing while knowing that I'm operating sightlessly, and that if we had just one or two more details, things would surely fall into place is an angrier churn than indigestion.

I scowl at my materials as I pack them up, and Andrew fidgets. He seems like he wants to say something but with my mood, I don't know if I want to talk to anyone. Especially a Leonid. Though, that's unfair since

he's younger than I am and wasn't involved in Lorenzo's actions toward my mother.

And he was helpful today.

Get over yourself, Stella. People are counting on you to create security and peace. I take a breath and focus on the teen.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

He freezes like he wasn't looking for an opening. My lips twitch, and he shakes himself a little bit.

"Yes. I—" He breaks off and looks uncomfortable. "I wanted to apologize."

I blink. "For what? Your prodding led us to realize that we're trying to solve a problem without knowing exactly what it is."

"Your wedding night." Andrew winces. "My brother and I are the reason your things weren't in the suite."

Ah. My stomach sinks. I want to claim that with everything that happened, I'd forgotten about the issue that had led me to pull Ben into this fray. But I hadn't.

The chasm of that night, with contemplating the reasons someone would do such a thing, even suspecting Stoneheart may have set it up for a moment, only for it to be the act of a couple of teenagers...it's a phantom pain rearing up unexpectedly. Because it did hurt to suspect it to be the Leonids, but it's worse now to get confirmation that I am unwelcome.

The nature of my birth continues. Lorenzo rejected me so how can I really be surprised that others would do the same?

Ariel asserts that I'm some hoped-for sign, but does anyone else really think that?

I close my eyes and try to release the old wounds telling me that I'm not enough. Because reading that action as rejection is bullshit. I know it's bullshit, and I'm going to prove them all wrong.

"Why?" I ask. Because now that he's torn off the poorly healed scars, I want to know.

"My brother does stupid pranks. He'd already—" Andrew's cheeks flush, and it's as if the hurt in my chest is his pain as well. "I don't have any excuse. I'm so sorry."

A prank by a teenager. There's no reason for it to scratch at raw places in my soul.

I am lady of this territory and have a responsibility to *all* the people here to look at situation with clear eyes. I pull myself up to my full height, and Andrew by instinct, tilts his bowed head and bares his neck.

“You helped him start trouble,” I say.

He winces. “He’s rash at the best of times, and I was afraid what Stoneheart would do to him if he were caught.”

“You’re not responsible for his actions.”

He doesn’t immediately agree. Has he always been the responsible one? Finally, Andrew clears his throat. “I have been. All my life. My father decreed it, but you’re right. He’s not here anymore.”

I blink, remembering that his father is Frank. I don’t know anything about what his home life was like with what we know about Lorenzo.

I don’t continue for a moment, watching Andrew’s anxiety rise and his need to fidget almost overtake him. With a determined breath, the worst of my feelings surrounding the situation drain. I will be the leader Lorenzo should have been.

“Thank you for apologizing,” I say. Andrew’s shoulders drop in relief.

I can’t deny the results of that night.

The prank may have stung, but it’s also the reason I summoned Ben into this whole mess...and I’m not sorry for that.

REMY

“YOU UNDERSTAND that Silas is going to have my head for this, right?” I ask as I clean the cut on Fiona’s forehead. The bruising under her skin is already starting to lighten with her healing abilities. Luckily, she’d only received a glancing blow.

Fiona glares. “I’m pretty sure you’re the boss of him. He’ll live.”

I huff. “Shows what you know.”

“He’s not going to care,” she mutters.

Now I laugh. It’s a short one full of disbelief. The situation that we are in is not a lighthearted one even if it was successful.

“Just do me a favor and keep out of his sight until that cut heals,” I say, and Fiona sticks out her tongue.

“The Council is going to hang you out to dry for meddling in a territory that’s not yours,” the lion shifter currently under the heel of one of my people spits. He’s probably a Leonid, if distantly related to Stella. The Council does hate when territory leaders overreach. It can threaten war between territories, and that would be very inconvenient for them.

But why they thought I wouldn’t chase down and retrieve my own people in a different territory is beyond me.

The other man involved is fae. He’s iridescent with pointed ears, but he’s not as talkative. Neither of them has given up any information. We know that two is too small to be the entirety of the operation, but they were easy enough to overpower once Fiona distracted them.

After narrowing down the location to within a ten-mile radius, the tracking witches were able to use the children's clothing to bring us to this rundown apartment building only a few blocks away from the fae gate in Lobo's city.

"Now why do you think I'll bring an issue as inconsequential as this to the Council?" I ask, amused when both of the men's faces whiten. Probably because they know well enough that it's easy to make people disappear when you don't involve pesky things like governing bodies.

"But we aren't in your jurisdiction," the shifter whispers like that matters.

Fiona snorts. "What the dog doesn't know won't hurt him."

I glance over at the two children my guards are inspecting for injuries. The girl can't be older than thirteen and the boy looks to be six. Celeste and Timothy Sova were being kept in the equivalent of a magic blocking kennel. The girl takes after her sirin mothers with white-blond hair and fair enough skin that the bruise on her cheek is vibrant.

I've already sent a message to Ben asking if he'll teleport them back to the territory, not wanting them to have to be forced in small quarters for the hours it will take to return home. The boy giggles at something one of the guards says, but it does nothing to dispel the shadows in the girl's eyes.

I would prefer what occurred today to hurt Lobo.

He's either guilty of colluding with my enemies or negligence.

I tsk, keeping the anger from my voice. "We have a set of cozy cells for you. No need to involve anyone else in this."

The door swings open, and an air settles over the space, my people still. Only one person in this territory would have the authority to ask the tracking witches to stand down and allow them to pass. A couple of wolf shifters enter, their yellow eyes flashing before they part, and the man of the hour enters.

His stance isn't aggressive, and I narrow my eyes.

"Stoneheart." Lobo nods in acknowledgment. "I received complaints about the noise."

"Noise tends to happen when retrieving children taken from my territory." I keep my tone cool.

Lobo glances at the scene before him. The perpetrators with hands bound behind their backs and the children my people are standing in front

of, before shrugging. "Get them out of my territory. I have no wish to be party to their actions."

"Their parents were taken through the gate," I grit out. "If it's too much of a hassle to watch out for *all* the people in your territory, I'll gladly take it off your hands."

Lobo's glare holds no heat to it. "Careful, gargoyle."

"Have a care with your allies, wolf."

Lobo's mouth twitches. "I have no allies."

His yellow eyes are tired. There's a familiar sorrow there that causes a sick sensation in my gut. I'd spoken to Stella just this morning of the catastrophe that the loss of love is for someone who has people depending on them. To see evidence of it now is eerie.

"I'll return if you can't find the will to live enough to do what's right," I say and ignore Fiona's arched brow.

I catch the flash of relief on Lobo's face before he muffles it around his personal guards. Whoever or whatever the wolf lost may indeed pull him down along with.

But that isn't my problem.

"I'll endeavor to stay off your schedule," Lobo says before turning on his heel and leaving. His wolf shifters are slower to leave, casting looks at each other before following their leader.

"Don't you have enough problems?" Fiona asks, poking my stomach. "The Council won't allow you to try to claim his territory."

"I have no desire to take on his pack," I muse, though I wouldn't hesitate to do just that if this continues to be a problem. "Perhaps they will intervene before he self-destructs."

"You think it's negligence?" Fiona asks.

I only nod. Sorrow like that holds a particular stench similar to decay.

One moment the space next to me is empty, and the next it holds Ben. He may be scentless, but the sight of him causes a ripple of warmth in my chest.

That ripple doesn't hit everyone the same because my guards pull weapons and shout in surprise. Ben raises his hands, his eyes widening and his form blinks semi-transparent for a moment before I call out an order that has the room easing with muttered curses.

“Sorry.” Ben solidifies, not needing to leave because of a threat. “I came as soon as I received your message.”

“I thought you would need to get more details to find us,” I say.

His lips twitch with something that’s not quite a smile or a wince. “It seems not.”

He doesn’t explain further, and I shrug. The demon takes in the room, his eyes hardening on the cage. The energy of him hums along my skin, but he doesn’t outwardly react.

“Are those the children?” Ben asks.

“Yes. Thank you for agreeing to transport them.”

“Of course.” Ben frowns as if he hasn’t told me multiple times that I’m not the boss of him. Though, I didn’t doubt he’d be willing to help. There’s an integrity that’s similar to how he holds on to responsibility with single-minded determination, but it serves this situation.

Our arrangement began with Stella’s need of him but has quickly evolved. He’s the only one I implicitly trust with my mate...and it’s occurring to me now in the presence of subdued enemies, I’m as concerned for his well-being as I am with Stella’s.

When did that happen?

“We won’t need your assistance with the prisoners,” I say to keep myself from further appreciating this demon’s character.

Ben stares hard at the men on the ground as if running through his mental Rolodex to see if he recognizes them before he shakes his head at me.

“Our benefactor has something special planned for you,” the fae one snarls at me.

I smile, but Ben stiffens before lowering himself with a deadly grace, his eyes showing his demonic nature. The fae flinches and squirms under the guard’s knee.

“And just which fae lord is your benefactor?” Ben asks. “We’re all dying to know.”

The fae glares with such hate at my demon that I can barely stand it.

“Ben.” I set a hand on his shoulder and not bothering to remove it when the guard kneeling on the fae takes note. My instincts want everyone to know that this demon is mine.

Ben stands, his frustration churning under my hand.

“You’ll wish you were dead,” the fae one says, his eyes burning on me.

I squeeze Ben’s shoulder when he tenses, wanting to impart a calm with my touch that neither of us has.

“I’m sure you’ll be able to regal us with all the details,” I say, nodding to the guard to remove the prisoners. Which they do after smacking a silencing charm on the men. No need to invite the likes of Lobo back here.

“Focus on the kids,” I murmur.

Ben glares at me. “You risk too much coming here, putting a target on your back.”

“Out of all the targets our enemies could select, I’d rather it be me. If they have a special treat in mind, I’m sure we’ll be able to get them to talk.” I smirk, a part of me wanting to instigate Ben further. I didn’t think he’d feel so...protective.

Instead, he takes a couple of steps back and takes a breath, hiding his worry from me and the world. “Where do you want me to take them?”

“To the penthouse for now. We don’t have the accommodations set up, but I’d rather we kept them close with the territory being the way it is. Where is Stella?”

“At the Rowan’s. She and her guards are probably heading back soon.”

“Good. Can you keep an eye on them until we get back?” I ask, nodding to the kids.

Ben shrugs. “Sure. I’ll let Silas know. Maybe he can get someone who knows what they’re doing to question them.”

I frown, not wanting to pressure the boy and girl if we could help it. “See if they are open to talking about it first. I don’t want us needing to rely on what they witnessed. I have a meeting with the harpies later. They apparently have allies past the gates, and with the Sovas being sirin, they’re under harpy representation.”

Ben’s face softens. “Good thinking.”

He takes a few steps toward the kids before hesitating and turning. “Be safe, Stoneheart.”

“I’ll try,” I murmur, but he’s already across the room, trying to put space between us.

BEN

I'VE BEEN ATTEMPTING to ignore the memory of what it feels like to be inside of Stella with Stoneheart's hard body pressed against mine all day, avoiding the hot shame of teleporting from that moment on the piano to the bed they share, hungry for the flavor of them before breaking.

It's distracting to wonder if Stoneheart noticed that the bedding had been changed, had any clue why. Hopefully he wouldn't guess that I went straight from the conservatory to fucking their sheets, mouthing the fabric pathetically in search of their mix of scents.

The memory throbs inside me so clearly, I could find Stoneheart with my eyes closed and feel Stella just as clearly.

They both devastate me.

Something I'd have to ponder on if I weren't so blessedly busy trying to entertain two kids.

"Do you want something to eat? To watch?" I ask. "I think there's a theater room somewhere in here."

The girl, Celeste, shrugs. Timothy had been cheerful with the guard, but now seems unsure of his surroundings and clings to his sister's leg. The expression on his face hurts my heart, but I focus on what I'm good at, providing solutions.

It takes some creativity, but sometime later we're settled enough. Celeste helps Timothy wash up and the front desk sends up new clothing for them.

Somehow, Silas procures a coloring page and pencils before disappearing to make calls to figure out what we're going to do with two kids. The mystery of how quickly he had these items on hand is solved when I look over Timothy's shoulder at the design as he focuses on staying in the lines of the giant exclamation point. When I'd glanced up at Silas before he left, he'd shrugged and muttered, "Francesca."

I wouldn't have assumed the cat shifter enjoyed coloring books, but I'm grateful.

Since Timothy can't read yet, he doesn't know he's coloring in a giant bubble lettered "Have a fucking great day!"

The coloring page pulls a tiny smile from Celeste, so I'm counting it as a win even though she denied any form of entertainment we offered her, preferring to watch her brother color. Or maybe unwilling to allow him out of her sight.

"Don't you need to ask us what happened?" she whispers, her blonde brows furrowing before her eyes flare. "Or have you guys given up trying to find our moms?"

"We don't want to pressure you." I nod toward Timothy at the coffee table who hums as he colors. He's not paying attention to our conversation and that makes this easier. "You and your brother have been through a lot. Are you okay talking about it?"

"Are they going to find them?" Her words are shaky as she ignores my question.

I sit back. Even though we are champing at the bit to gain as much information as we possibly can, I refuse to push her past what she's comfortable talking about. This is something that must be done at their pace.

"Stoneheart is working on it," I say. I may be wary of the gargoyle, but I have every confidence that he is devoted to protecting the people in his territory. Even if it involves traveling to the fae plane, an option that makes me itchy with how risky that would be for him.

She doesn't look at all assured, and it hurts that I know the real concern in her question. Are her mothers even still alive?

I clear my throat and recall what I know about sirin. "Your kind are prized for your singing ability. There's a good chance he'll find them."

Celeste blinks a couple of times before she nods. "Okay."

“I want Dad,” Timothy interjects, staring at the end of his colored pencil. His lower lip trembles.

“Dad is away,” Celeste says, sounding tired.

I blink. “You guys have a dad?”

The teenager gives me a droll look. “That is how babies are made.”

I whip my phone out to message Silas. There had been no mention of a father figure. Sirin, like harpies, are only female. They select breeding partners outside of their kind with the girl children taking after their mother and the boy children, the selected male.

Harpies culturally don’t include the fathers in their family structures, but sirins are such a small population that I don’t know what their tradition is. Since there were only the two mothers on the lease, we’d been assuming the father was out of the picture.

“What is his name? We can contact him,” I say.

Celeste looks cautiously optimistic. “His name is Torin Black, but you probably won’t be able to get ahold of him.”

I move to start messaging contacts, not wanting to disappoint her.

“I’ll summon him,” Timothy proudly announces.

“It won’t work.” Celeste tries to explain as she rolls her eyes. “Our dad is a demon. Like you. He travels to the demon plane for work. He’s not supposed to be back for another couple of weeks and anyway, Timmy’s too young to summon.”

“Am not!” Timmy frowns hard like he’s concentrating. The air wavers for a moment, but nothing happens. I roll my shoulders. The boy is still too young to tap into much power, I hadn’t identified him as a demon until his attempt, but there was a fire associated with the energy that has me mentally sorting through the various contacts I have on the demon plane.

Celeste’s shoulders drop in disappointment. “See.”

I open my mouth to reassure Celeste, but Timmy pulls a piece of jewelry from his jeans pocket and holds it up proudly. I freeze.

“I’m old enough to get this, aren’t I?” he says.

“What is that?” I ask, measured even though excitement sparks at the intricate design.

“The group who came in the night each had one around their neck,” Celeste says with a shrug. “He must have grabbed it before they locked us up.”

The spark turns into a flame. That looks like a charm, and I happen to know a witch who would be very interested in seeing it. If it's something that can affect wards, this might be exactly what Stella needs to make a counter charm.

"May I have that?" I ask Timmy who frowns at first so I continue, "It would help us find out about the people who took you and keep other people in the territory safe."

Timmy thinks hard for a moment before handing over the item. "I want to help."

"Thank you," I say, suddenly humbled. The kid just was rescued from a cage and still has the room to be generous.

"I want to help too," Celeste says softly, her shoulder's stiffening as she straightens.

I nod, sensing that she's ready to talk. "How many intruders would you say there were?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe six?" Her brows crease but her eyes have the same sort of pride that Timmy's do even if there are shadows. I try to keep my questions short, not wanting to frustrate her if she can't answer specifics.

"Can you tell me what happened?"

Her breathing increases, and I'm humbled all over again when she pushes through the panic and starts talking. "We were watching movies and Mama B got up to get more popcorn since we were about halfway through." Another deep breath, and she swallows. "It happened so fast. The door flew open, and all these people wearing black were there. They slapped a null collar on Mom first. I screamed."

Celeste's eyes are wide in question. All her flashing anger and caution are lost to the innocence on her face. "I screamed so loud, but no one came."

I unclench my jaw and breathe through the rage. "They may have treated the area with a spell that muffled the noise."

It's something I have to believe. Otherwise, the concept that she would cry out and not be helped by any of her neighbors makes me want to raze this territory to the ground and walk away.

Celeste bites her lips and accepts my answer easily enough, falling back into silence. If she were an adult, I'd push to get more. I'd ask

specifics about what the group was wearing, how they were moving, when they separated her mothers from her and Timmy, but she's not an adult. She's barely a teenager.

Stoneheart is right to not want to need their intel. Children should be protected, and it's not worth interrogating them if he can get more information from elsewhere.

"Did anything seem unusual to you, other than that piece they wore?" I ask.

She shakes her head. "They covered their faces. Dumb and Dumber removed their masks later, but they didn't talk about much that made sense except something about how the Devil would get his due."



STELLA LEANS AGAINST MY SHOULDER, napping, when I finally get in touch with the demon father of the kids. She'd come home frustrated and exhausted from her attempts at charm making, but still determined to help the kids feel at home. I'd had her make popcorn, and we'd put on some animated classic.

Celeste had been hesitant, but her and Timmy relaxed to the bright colors and music, and a part of my chest warmed at the idea of at least trying to rewrite this experience so it wouldn't blend in with that terrible night.

"Your dad is on his way," I whisper.

Celeste perks up immediately. "Really?"

Her expression of excitement makes my heart all fuzzy.

"Yeah," I say. "A friend of a friend was able to get in touch with him and tell him what happened. He should actually be here in a few minutes."

Celeste smiles and moves to poke Timmy but huffs a laugh at his sleeping form. The kid really has been through it.

She turns back to me. "Thank you. For being honest about if they'll find our moms."

I frown. "Of course."

"Some people think that just because we're kids, we don't understand, so they don't even bother trying to explain."

I swallow. I know she understands too much about the danger of our world. I was only a little younger than her when Kalos took me in. Maybe it's why I feel so protective over these two.

On my deep breath in, Stella wakes with a mumble. I kiss her forehead in thoughtless affection, before remembering that I shouldn't be doing something like that in front of others, but the kids aren't paying attention to me. A voice calls through the penthouse.

"Celeste? Timmy?"

Timmy startles awake. "Dad?"

Celeste pulls him up with her. "Dad!"

They run out of the room. Their excitement has something warm catching in my throat.

"Good news I'm guessing," Stella says, blinking sleepily.

"We were able to find their dad."

She focuses on me. "You were able to find their dad. Good job, Ben."

"They've been through enough. I didn't want to force them to stay with strangers."

"You're good with them. Kids."

I shrug, uncomfortable. "Maybe I can just relate to wanting the world to make sense."

"And for good to triumph over evil."

My lips twitch. "Everyone wants that. Unless the Devil is involved. Then we would definitely want him to win."

I pull her to her feet. "I want to make sure they're taken care of."

We find Silas and the happy family in the penthouse entryway.

Torin Black looks exactly as a demon should—human. We are beings of energy and especially for those born on this plane, the human form is what is common. He's a mountain of a man and probably terrifying if he weren't on his knees clutching his children as if they may disappear.

"I'm so sorry," he murmurs, kissing their hair. "I was so worried when I heard."

My throat swells at the scene.

"Do you have any word on their mothers?" he asks.

"They were taken though a fae gate, but we have a team looking for your mates," Silas says.

Torin shakes his head. “We aren’t mates, but they’re my friends. Carrie and Beth are in a relationship together. I was just supposed to be a sperm donor.” He looks down at his kids, who obviously know this story, with chagrin. “But I got a little attached without meaning to. Thankfully Carrie and Beth don’t mind.”

“Demons bond naturally,” Tim recites.

Torin nods, swinging his son’s arm. “That we do, buddy.”

I blink at the reminder. I almost never spend time around demons, and it can be easy to forget that part of our natures. I’ve never been a concern since I haven’t created any organic bonds before.

“You’re a co-parent?” I ask, not wanting to dwell on thoughts of bonds.

“As often as their mothers and work will allow me to be,” Torin answers. “I have the paperwork to prove it if you need. I want to get these two home.”

“Where’s home?” I ask while Silas nods for the papers. There’s a strange tightness in my throat at the idea of the kids leaving. It’s silly. Of course he’s going to take them home. That’s the whole reason we contacted him.

“I keep an apartment in this territory where we stay when I get time with them,” he explains. There’s stress to his mouth like he’s worried we won’t let him claim his children.

“Will you allow a guard to go with you?” Silas asks.

Torin lets the question sink in before nodding. He understands the unspoken reasons. None of us want to state the risk in front of the kids that whoever was responsible for their abduction could target them again if they think the kids saw something incriminating.

“I’d welcome extra eyes from the Devil,” Torin says.

Silas nods. “Very good.”

It feels like no time passes at all before Torin leaves and takes the kids with him. I wave, morose that I may never see them again.

“Have a fucking great day!” Timmy calls back, and I wince.

STELLA

I PANT. Swollen heat beats through my body as I surface from a dream of tangled bodies and teasing fangs. I don't know what time it is, but it's still dark. I blow out a breath, still half asleep and trying to push against the covers, but they don't move.

Other details come into focus.

A heavy forearm rests against the skin of my stomach, my sleep shirt pushed up, and a clawed hand grips my bare breast. There's a furnace against my back that gives an unguarded masculine sigh. It's an oddly reassuring position if a little warm for my tastes except for the *bare* cock rocking against my ass.

The skin of his thighs brushes mine, the kilt he wears is bunched at my lower back. My shorts are damp, and his sticky precum smooths each glide of his hardness against the thin fabric.

There must be something weak in my biology for this gargoyle because even in sleep, I'm primed. Every point of contact makes me needy in a way that I've been trying to avoid with him.

He wants me to beg. He wants my surrender, but I didn't think he'd try to get it this way.

"S-Stoneheart?" I ask softly.

My husband's mouth opens against my neck, his tongue sliding as his lips suck over the mating mark he left on me. The sensuous glide has my lashes falling, and I shudder on an inhale.

If I were any more awake, I'd castigate myself for rolling my hips back to get more contact. In the dark of morning, I can forget that he'll never give into the part of him that is just as entranced with me as I am with him.

I can forget that the boundaries in his heart are clear in the sand.

His movements are uncoordinated, and his chest rumbles in pleasure as he grinds himself against my body. That's odd. He's usually so exacting with each touch and—

My eyes pop open.

He's asleep.

"*Fuck*," I whisper, torn between waking his grumpy ass up or just waiting for whatever dream he's having to end and falling back asleep to avoid the awkwardness.

I squirm in his hold. Maybe if I try to escape, he'll wake up enough to roll over, but the strategy proves to be flawed when his cock slips up one of the loose leg holes of my shorts and brushes my pussy.

I freeze. A little horrified but a lot turned on. The fucker isn't even awake, and I'm already halfway to orgasm.

"So sweet," he mumbles.

Stella Elderflower, you will wake this gargoyle up right now! I try to lecture myself, but my body doesn't respond. My brain can say that there are rules concerning this gargoyle, but my bones want him. Our battle of wills has left me bruised and needy. Greedy even though he'd gifted Ben the intimacy of fucking me the other night.

And I'm so wet. Like the ripest peach just brimming over with juice. On his next rock, the head of him breaks through my folds, hitting against my swollen clit. I breathe a moan, and his hand squeezes my breast harder before the rocking of his hips halts.

He stops sucking on my skin and kisses it instead.

"Wife," he says. His voice is deep and gruff and suddenly very awake.

I swallow, and my cheeks burn in humiliation, but I don't try and pretend I'm asleep. I suspect he'd know I was lying, and I'm not a coward. "Husband."

He sighs and inhales against my neck. "Apologies. Your scent is acting like a magnet to me."

I frown even as my lashes flutter at the brush of his breath against the fine hairs there. “Really?”

It can’t be a terribly strong magnet since I sure haven’t experienced waking up with him like this before. Maybe it’s because we’ve been far more intimate than at the beginning?

“You’re fertile. My instincts are sensitive to you,” he says.

I stiffen. *Fertile*. The thoughts of creating an heir that have circulated in my mind, and I assumed had quieted, come fighting to the surface. Instead of delving more into that, I stick to facts. “But I have a charm to prevent pregnancy.”

“Your body goes through the same cycle even as the charm keeps you from conceiving.”

He’s right. I do have periods. It makes sense that I would have times of being extra enticing to go along with them.

He hasn’t yet pulled away. His cock rests against me, collecting my essence, and waiting for the moment to slide inside.

“For being sorry, you haven’t stopped,” I say.

“Do you want me to stop, firefly?” Stoneheart doesn’t move with any hurry as the pads of his fingers skim over the mound of my breast. His nose tickles the back of my ear.

I swallow, making sure to stay still even as everything inside me craves to push back, to ask for more. My wetness is a goddamn mess, seeping and soaking his ruddy cock. My core trembles in need.

Do I want him to stop?

I distract myself with snark. “I’ve been meaning to ask who inspired that nickname first. Me or the building?”

Stoneheart makes a disgruntled sound and starts to pull away.

“Don’t stop!” I say, unable to bear the thought of being left like this.

His satisfaction echoes in his chest. “Then beg me for it.”

My exhale is sharp and my curse silent. *Fuck this guy*.

I arch my back to slide his cock inside of me, but he’s too quick and draws his hips away, and I whimper. He releases my breast in the same breath, gripping my hip instead.

“Don’t make me deny you, wife,” he growls, and the wave of arousal at the sound threatens to pull me under. “This game is what we both need.”

It doesn't feel like a game. It feels like pulling away now would be the same as having strips of skin taken from me, or chunks of heart.

Submission is such a small price in comparison.

"Please, Remy." My voice breaks along with my will. "I need you."

Something whiplike but strong wraps around my shorts and pulls them down. His tail. My thoughts stutter when his skin presses against mine, and the crown of him slides through my folds. I only have time to gasp before he goes from teasing me to adjusting his position to thrust inside me.

I moan. There's so much of my arousal smeared between my thighs, but the stretch is sharp before giving way to the thundering swell of being *full*. He slides slightly from me to allow my body to slicken him some before driving forward again.

"*Fuck*," I whisper for the second time this night. He feels giant entering me like this. His cock is sizable, but with his grip on my hips and the angle I can only accept him.

"You take me so well," he growls.

"More," I demand and yelp when he smacks my ass.

"All in good time. Take the fucking I give you like the good wife you are."

I stiffen, wanting to fight him, but when he rolls his hips against me, the slow stretch devours my defiance. Without that shield, I'm naked, the part of me that aches to give Stoneheart everything left bare.

I give in.

Stoneheart makes a rough sound in triumph as my body relaxes. Each thrust of his body goes deeper, hits the spot inside my body better until the flare of his knot kisses my pussy lips.

I whimper as the contact wakes something necessary in me. I work to ease my body more, to accept that part of him, but he pulls back and thrusts, smacking his knot against me. I cry out and tighten around him.

"Our demon is right. You feel like heaven," Stoneheart groans into my ear.

I would have assumed that my mind would barely be able to grasp the thought of Ben right now, but the sentiment stays, spreading through my veins with the deceptive comfort of warm alcohol and searing reality of electricity. What would he do if he were here? Would he be jealous? Or

would he be as turned on as I had been when I watched Stoneheart order Ben around with a vicious kiss?

The warm and sizzle of pleasure ebbs higher and higher like cresting waves. I want to be filled by this gargoyle. I need to discard everything until he can reside so deep in my soul and body neither of us can fight the draw.

“Your knot.” I gasp. “I need it.”

My words say one thing, but my body does another. I’m clawing away from him as if to escape. His cock slips from me making a mess of the sheets as instincts have me fleeing.

“Think you can handle that, firefly?” He shifts and grips my hips hard. I splay out on my stomach as his weight pins me down from behind. His conquering cock thrusts back into me as he snarls.

I cry out, but don’t stop trying to move, wanting to rock back to take more and forward to force him to claim me like an animal would his mate at the same time.

“Being filled to the brim with me?” he hisses.

He tightens the grip on my hips as if he’s going to hold me in place while sinking forward. I stretch around the hardness of his knot, and that’s all it takes to break me. I clench the sheets and cry out in release, expecting the stretch to rocket me higher, for that thickness of his to push me past capacity and lock inside of me.

Pleasure rips through me like a wildfire, quick but starting to die off, searching for the next grove to devour. But there’s no greater swell. He doesn’t sink deeper. Instead, I lose the pressure of his knot only for it to be replaced with his fist squeezing around it.

He grunts and heat fills my body.

We gasp together, his chest warm against my back is a comfort, but doesn’t quiet the sudden dissonance of the moment. This wasn’t the way it was supposed to be.

He massages the place on my hip where he probably left bruises, the stroke of his hand on my skin helps. The trembling of my body quiets even as confusion roars.

I barely have my bearings before he slides from my body, leaving me sopping and empty. I turn, and the bed creaks as he sits up and throws his

legs over the opposite edge of the bed. The glow of a phone screen is harsh in the dark.

“You didn’t knot me,” I say. My words are like fingers trying to claw into this gargoyle who swings from someone my soul recognizes into a stranger in the span of a breath. Disappointment that I can barely understand holds tight around my heart.

“A knot comes with more than just my seed filling your pretty cunt,” he says facing away from me. “It has the power to influence emotions.”

“And you don’t want those types of emotions for me,” I say. I idly wonder if the sinking sensation in my stomach will ever bottom out or if it will always feel like it’s falling into the abyss between us.

Stoneheart doesn’t reply to that. He stands, and in the low light I watch him straightening his kilt until it falls the way it should.

“You’re leaving?” I ask. Turns out my stomach *can* sink lower.

He grunts in affirmation. “I have a lead I need to follow up on.”

I sit up and blink at my lap, not knowing what I want to do or ask. It gets even more awkward when his cum starts seeping out of me. He really did fill me to the brim, just not the way I thought he was going to.

When I swallow enough to speak again, he’s come over to my side of the bed like he’s going to kiss me goodbye. I tilt my face up, and his talons comb through my hair before he pulls away, sighing.

“Sleep, Stella. It’s early.”

And somehow, even with how full I am, I’ve never felt emptier.

STELLA

“WHAT’S THAT?” I ask after swallowing my bite of Silas’s exceedingly sweet cereal. The lizard man is currently conversing with Francesca at the dining table while Ben shows me something from his place at the counter.

My eyes are still a little bleary. I was eventually able to go back to sleep, and in the light of day, what happened with Stoneheart only causes a light ache in my chest.

I have more to give than being a sad sap.

I have Ben who is holding out a piece of metal that I squint at. I have this territory to care for, even if half the time it’s hard to believe that I can make any difference.

I have Stoneheart’s obsession. He named the damned building after the term of endearment he has for me whether he ever admits it or not.

I don’t need his love.

Lust will keep the both of us warm, even if he’s as cold as his namesake.

If only I didn’t admire him so much. If only I was less needy. Maybe then I wouldn’t want to own his heart. Maybe then I wouldn’t carry the piece of labradorite around in my pocket like a good luck charm because the thoughtfulness of the gift warms me.

I need to stop being greedy and get over the way the lack of affection after sex this morning felt like a rejection.

Ben places the piece of metal in my hand, and I turn it over with a frown. The hum of it is so weird. Like it’s there and then not. The taste on

my tongue is like nothing I've sensed before.

"Timmy stole it off one of the abductors. Celeste says they all wore one. I'm no expert, but I thought you may want to take a look and see if it's what's allowing them past wards."

Finally, my sluggish brain catches up. My eyes are wide when I look up, and he grins at me.

"Holy shit. This is what we needed. Ben!" My hand gestures before I take hold of the object with both hands with a little shriek. "Oh fuck! This could change everything."

I throw my arms around him despite the presence of Stoneheart's people and jump in place. Ben laughs and hugs me back. "I thought you'd appreciate it."

I pull away. "Why didn't you show me last night?"

He becomes stern. "You mean when you were dead on your feet from magic exertion?"

My lips twitched. "It wasn't that bad."

Ben barely keeps from rolling his eyes. "You need to take better care of yourself. You were already drained yesterday. I didn't want to tempt you to push harder. Now you can start fresh."

I do have a tendency to pour a little too much energy into my charms. I joke sometimes that I'm a professional napper.

"Let's go to Rowan's!" I say.

Exasperation flickers over Ben's expression. "Finish eating your breakfast."

I groan. "You're not supposed to be the one bossing me around."

But I shovel more of the cereal in my mouth, munching as quickly as I can without choking.

His lips twitch. He keeps the volume of his next words low. "I'm just looking out for you until we can both get bossed around."

BEN

IF WATCHING Stella work her magic was hypnotizing before, that holds nothing to now. This is her completely in her element, crafting to reach a solution. She's like an unstoppable force of nature. A goddess of chaos prepared to destroy anything in her path to find what she's looking for.

Even if it's currently escaping her.

She had a long conversation with Rowan's brother, the ward master. I was surprised the man fit in this back room, but they spoke in depth about ward symbols.

My understanding of magic crafting could fill a thimble, but it seems like somehow the fae charm makes one of the symbols in witch wards... disappear? Makes the ward not see them? It's pretty confusing, but I'm not the one who needs to understand it. Stella is running a hundred miles an hour. The ward master left with a harsh grumble about figuring out how to craft a ward without the symbol in question, but Stella isn't waiting for him.

Four prototypes have failed so far, but she doesn't let up. When I stop her to eat lunch, I fear for my balls, but she shoves a protein bar in her mouth and guzzles a bottle of water before disappearing into her task again.

Connors is probably the wise one to walk the perimeter and watch the surroundings of the bookshop, but I'm fascinated by my witch. Because she is mine, even if for only a little while. I rub my chest, wondering if I'd

give the same designation to a certain gargoyle when I'm distracted by the buzz of my phone which I silent before Stella can glare at me.

She gets testy about distractions when she's like this.

I glance at the text message, expecting it to be Kalos, but freeze in surprise that it's Stoneheart. Think of the Devil...

Stoneheart: Does she seem okay?

I frown and glance at Stella, thinking of the odd mood she'd been in this morning. Apprehension tickles the hairs on my neck. Something happened.

Me: Why wouldn't she be?

It takes no time for his answer.

Stoneheart: No reason.

Bullshit. I blow out a breath, unsure how much of a right I have to demand a truthful answer. That's incorrect. He's given me the right. He involved me in this. Before I can inform him of that he sends another text.

Stoneheart: If you could keep her from the penthouse until five, it would be appreciated. I have people working on the bedroom.

I blink in surprise. Stella's workshop comes to mind. He'd masterfully created that space for her. Is he doing the same with their bedroom? Does he feel guilty?

Me: Is it a surprise?

Stoneheart types for a moment before pausing and then starts up again. There's another pause, and my lips tip up when he finally sends the message because it's only four words.

Stoneheart: Just keep her busy.

So it is a surprise, but the gargoyle doesn't want to treat it like one for some reason. Curiouser and curiouser. I'm wondering in what way he fucked up, but Stoneheart isn't going to tell me, and Stella will tear my head from my body if I disrupt her right now with such a question.

I sigh, a part of me enjoying this interplay as I go back to watching our witch.



“FUCK, FUCK, FUCK.” Stella sits back, stunned.

Is this a good *fuck* or a bad *fuck*? It sounds different from the other *fucks* she's recited today. I've come close to interrupting her again just for her to take a break because she's been at this nonstop, but I haven't come to the point of wanting to incur her wrath again for anything less than necessary.

"I did it!" Her grin takes up her whole face.

"It works?" I ask.

"It works!" she shouts. Her happiness is so bright pulls me toward her like I'm some wilted flower, and she's the sun.

All day her intensity and presence has wrapped around me, snaring deep hooks in my chest. Her brand of vibrant chaos summoning me as any being of energy would be. It's only now that her attention is on me that I give in to the tug.

She throws her arms around my neck, and I don't know who kisses who first, but her plush lips devour mine *hard*.

Stella's emotions overflow as she grasps my shirt with one hand and the back of my neck with the other. The kiss is all radiance and fire. Her joy transitions to need as quickly as the spark of an ember.

I fall into her kiss, meeting her outpouring with my own. Relief and hunger whip up in my soul.

Her legs wrap around my hips, and I press her into the worktable. My cock is heavy, grinding in the cradle of her thighs and zipping sensations up my spine. She moans and breaks the kiss to take a breath. "Fuck," she says, and I don't need an interpretation guide for this one. It's all tasty need.

There's a sound from the front of the store, and I freeze. We're exposed. Stoneheart hasn't gone out of his way to hide our arrangement, but if the news truly gets out, it will cause complications.

He also hasn't given me permission to take this past a kiss without him.

I nip her lower lip before pulling away.

"No," she pants in complaint, and I shush against her lips.

"Later, love," I say without a thought.

"Please," she whispers and rocks her hips.

I huff a laugh. "I'm saving us both from punishment, temptress."

Her expression does an odd thing at the reminder that we aren't the only ones in this relationship.

Ah, yes, Stoneheart fucked up somehow.

But she fixes her face quickly. "We need to tell him about the charm. Let's go."

"Now?" I ask, looking at my watch. It's *almost* five.

I send a text to Connors let him know that we're leaving, and he's in the clear to head back.

Maybe if Stoneheart had been more forthcoming with his plans, I'd be better at following his orders. Or maybe, even though I'm saving Stella from punishment, I have no wish to save myself.

REMY

“AND WHAT DO I owe the pleasure of such an esteemed visitor?” I ask, taking a seat behind the meeting table in the library. Councilor Moon strolls to a shelf of books, looking over the spines. His tied-back long white hair and beard try to age him, but his tall strong body exudes his immortality.

He definitely should get rid of the beard.

“This shelf construction is beautiful. Was it done by the gargoyles I passed on my way in?” Moon asks.

“It was. The Bramblewicks do good work.” I make small talk. As a rule, I never interact with gargoyle society, but the Bramblewick clan doesn’t count. They are far from the hierarchical xenophobic collection of clans who somehow still manage to breed *pure*.

The Bramblewicks are a bunch of misfits who give humans as much status as gargoyles and are the best at quality construction projects. Being gargoyles means that they understand the importance of a gift, especially when one makes yet another misstep with one’s mate.

I didn’t enjoy the way I left her this morning. There’s a miasma clinging to the memory that attempts to taint the pleasure we shared. It’s the same darkness that lingering in my heart and caused me discomfort for days after our wedding night. Guilt that wars with craving need.

How can I stay in control of myself while fucking my wife?

I don’t know how to interact with her without wanting to capitulate to everything she wants. Perhaps with time, she won’t look to me for

softness, but it doesn't stop me from wanting to give it to her now.

It doesn't stop the ache when I withhold it.

The energy of the room changes, and I roll my shoulders as curious shadow wisps turn into Ben and Stella. Does she always squeeze her eyes shut when he teleports her?

"Ah, Lady Stella." Moon rises, his tone light. "I was hoping you'd be able to be present for my visit."

"Councilor Moon." Her cheeks were flushed, but they lose color as soon as she sees him. I wish I could assure her that everything is fine, but his presence is an omen.

Moon rarely leaves his massive estate.

"And Mr. Barnes, I didn't expect you," Moon says.

Ben swallows, his face expressionless. "Kalos has an interest the stabilization of this territory. We're offering a helping hand."

I barely keep my lips from twitching in amusement. *A helping hand indeed.* I narrow my eyes at the time before casting a glance at the demon. It's ten minutes to five.

The Bramblewicks are gone, but if Ben and Stella had gotten here any sooner, the work they did in bedroom wouldn't have been finished.

The demon arches his brow in challenge.

I focus on our visitor. I'll deal with the insolent masochist later.

"You were just going to tell me what made you want to leave your castle to visit us," I say to Moon.

The councilor's brows rise, perhaps in surprise that I'm not ordering Ben away, but I don't owe him an explanation. I have plans for these two.

"I suppose we should just get down to it," Moon says. "The Council has noticed the unrest in your territory."

My lips purse, and I readjust in my seat. Stella somehow gets paler.

"Unrest is expected when a new territory leader takes over," I say.

"What is this really about?"

Moon takes a chair with a sigh. "It's multilayered. First, rumors of the Sova family have spread."

"They've been retrieved. I hardly think that's a bad thing," I say with a shrug. Stella looks surprised, and I nod to her. "The mothers of the children are home where they belong. We were able to get them from the fae plane this morning."

Relief is stark on her face, but Moon continues.

“And they were taken in the first place.”

I narrow my eyes before rolling them. We both know that the incident occurred before I took over, but we also both know that it doesn't matter. “Of course, when missing people were whispered about instead of acknowledged, that wasn't a problem. So what is the plan of the Council? It sounds like they've already made up their minds.”

Moon's chin dips. “They will run a vote in the territory. A certain portion want the people here to give a vote of no confidence.”

Ben sucks in a breath. A territory vote is very rare. It's within the Council's rights as overseers, but it risks angering other territory leaders.

“To which they'll sweep in and place their own chosen figurehead,” I assume, not showing my anger. “Lobo's uncle must not realize that his nephew isn't in a position to take over more territory.”

Moon nods, unsurprised by that insight. He's the Council representative for all creatures who aren't witches or shifters. He has his fingers in many pies.

“And what would you suggest?” Stella asks.

Moon shrugs. “You need to have the territory put their trust in you. Anticipate foul play. Some representatives will not go about things fairly here, and I expect they will send agents to sow dissention.”

This is a game of politics. In the face of real problems, like securing the territory from the group trying to traffic our people, it's exhausting. I sigh. “All because they don't want to give Kalos his win?”

Now the immortal being across from me rolls his eyes. “Of course. They wish to exert as much power as they possibly can against him. Perhaps even tempt him to violence so they can finally attempt to put him down. They don't realize that it will be the last thing they try to do. Don't disregard your own standing though.”

I frown.

Moon continues, “With this territory grab, there are those who see you as getting too powerful for how rare your kind is. You hold too much influence that they can't get their hands on.”

They'd deserve it if Kalos and I teamed up together and wiped them from the map. But that would be anarchy, and the casualties of war don't

hit the strongest, they hit the vulnerable. My eyes rest on Stella's too-pale face. I will not endanger those I protect.

"How long?" I ask.

"You have about a week before they make the vote public, and maybe another week before the votes are cast," Moon says.

They're moving quickly. "Thank you for the warning."

The immortal shrugs. "It's good for everyone if when the vote is cast, you come out on top. The other councilors may not see that, but I do."

He is used to thinking of things in a much longer window than the others he serves with. It's unfortunate that a faction refuses to listen to him.

Moon bids farewell and leaves the room on a somber note. The guard who directed him here meets him in the hall and leads him back to the elevator.

It's just the three of us now. Stella begins pacing, like the energy around her needs an outlet.

"This is only giving truth to our suspicions. It doesn't change anything," I say.

"It changes a lot. The charms aren't enough," Stella breathes. "Fuck, I can't possibly make them fast enough to provide the level of comfort we need."

"You figured out how to make the charms?" I ask. Last I heard, she was still struggling with the limitations of the magic.

She nods distractedly, but pride swells in my chest.

She's done the impossible. Is there anything this witch can't do if she puts her mind to it?

My eyes meet Ben's, and his grim expression lightens for a moment. We both appreciate how one-of-a-kind she is. My admiration for her increases by the day. Perhaps that is why it's so hard to resist her.

"What if we conceive an heir?" Stella says.

I freeze. A stricken look flashes over Ben's features before he reels it back in.

She continues, "Ariel recommended it. Said the territory was hoping for it."

I turn to take her in. Her lips are pressed thin, determination rolling off her in waves.

Anyone who didn't know her would think that Stella desires to be a martyr over and over again. Once to marry me to save her friend, and now again by offering up her body for the territory.

But they'd be wrong. They wouldn't see the fire that exists in my mate.

They don't see the woman holding my gaze and wanting to secure this territory in a way that leaves the Council frothing.

She wants to win. I don't know how she was ever able to hide in the shadows. Her light called to me even then. She was born to lead whether she knows it or not.

But all those higher thoughts are drowned out by baser instincts. The hunger that I attempt to temper roars to the surface. The guilt from my misstep this morning won't stop me from devouring her lovely sacrifice. I'm only so strong.

"Be very careful wife," I say, standing and striding around the table toward her. The sweetness of her scent has been driving me up the wall. I'd never spent much time contemplating the need for an heir. I'd never assumed that mating the witch I've been obsessed with would make me want to mount her, but the compulsion is one that buzzes in the back of my mind.

Stella's breath catches when I get to a step away and stop. My mouth waters, but this is something that requires clarity.

I make my voice soft. "Are you saying you want me to put a baby in you?"

Strategically, an heir would be a boon. Stella's aunt is correct. Along with the charms, it could be enough to tilt the odds in our favor. I'll do my best to tip the scales of course, but an heir speaks of commitment. It realizes the need of the people here for our mating to be above suspicion.

Stella blinks rapidly and glances at Ben who is motionless, hands clenched at his sides. He doesn't know that we've fucked without his help, but maybe, just maybe, my queen's knight will stay if she admits to needing him. It's a concession I'm selfish enough to enjoy for this.

The love he has for her is the consolation prize she more than deserves.

I grasp her chin. "Do you want *us* to put a baby in you?"

Her pupils expand.

Ben's eyes widen, and he shakes his head. "It needs to be yours by blood—"

“We’ll be careful,” I cut him off with a careless shrug. “Are you saying you wouldn’t want to help breed our witch?”

Ben’s mouth drops open, but the flare of desire is there in the reddening of his cheeks.

Ah, he assumed that this would be the moment he’d be dismissed. Shortsighted demon. His presence allows me to torment her in a way that we will all enjoy.

I like the flavor of her anger. And maybe if she busy gnashing her teeth and cursing my name, those wide eyes of hers will stop gouging my heart for what I can’t give her.

Maybe, with his help, I can put a baby inside her without fanning the dangerous flames inside me that could destroy everything I’ve ever worked for

Fuck. The forbidden part of my heart that tries to stir around these two throbs at the idea of tying us tighter together. Of filling our witch until my seed takes root. This is a claiming whether either of them considers it to be.

They will both be mine, and the rightness of that thought is a checkmate.

But I’ll still make her work for it.

Stella finds her voice, and it burns as hot as her determination. “If Ben helps, then yes.”

The demon in question is still stunned, but his nod is almost imperceptible.

My grin is so sharp it hurts. “Then let us begin.”

STELLA

MY MOUTH FALLS OPEN. I don't know if I'm more surprised by the room in front of me or the cascade of events. Ben turns from his place in the middle of our bedroom, having teleported here from the library so Stoneheart and I could be seen by his people entering our room together.

He'd led me here with my hand on his elbow like some chivalrous king. Each step caused my heart to beat quicker than the last. It's a relief that he didn't try for small talk while scenarios of what we're about to do flashed through my thoughts. How exactly will Stoneheart involve Ben in this task? The mechanics are simple enough. I'd had him inside of me just this morning, but maybe that's the point.

Ben is here to keep this from feeling like what happened earlier.

I'm distracted from all the unknowns by the sight of our bedroom.

"What is this?" I ask, but don't expect an answer other than Stoneheart's shrug.

The hotel-like bedroom I'd left just this morning is gone. The more I take in the scene, the more details jump out.

The biggest difference is the bed. The minimalist headboard has been replaced with a massive hand carved creation in a warm-toned wood that rises up the wall. It would look heavy, but the carving has delicate openings like lace showcasing a swirling organic design of what looks to be flowers.

The number of pillows has multiplied, ranging from soft lavender to deep plum and garnet.

The gauzy curtains hanging from a new canopy cements the romantic and moody feeling of the room. I blink, realizing the rest of the furniture has been switched out for plusher appearing chairs in darker colors.

And that's when I see the piano placed against the wall of the sitting area. It's an upright rather than the baby grand we desecrated at my aunt's, but if the expression on Ben's face is anything to go by, it's impressive.

"Think of it as a courting gift," Stoneheart says before looking uncomfortable and lowering his voice. "And perhaps an apology."

"An apology for what?" Ben asks, taking his attention away from the piano.

Stoneheart ignores him, but I know. It's for this morning. I can't track this gargoyle's motivations. He detailed that our relationship wouldn't be anything more than what happened between us earlier, but it seems to have settled as well for him as it did for me.

But instead of feeling rejected, it left him guilty.

I turn away and meander toward the bed, not wanting the memories of being left alone to take from this experience. The headboard is a masterpiece. I trace my fingers over the design, analyzing it.

"I love it," I say. Stoneheart barely acknowledges my awe-soaked words. Why would he? He's the master of his domain. He knew I would appreciate it, and so he made it happen. My fingernail catches on the loop that makes up the shape of a familiar cluster of blooms.

The flowers are forget-me-nots.

I glance behind me, meeting my husband's gaze. This is more than providing a piano to tempt the demon. He put the symbol I've used for Ben into our marriage bed.

I don't think I've quite believed that Stoneheart was honest with his acceptance of Ben being a permanent part of our relationship even if he hinted as much. But this is significant.

This speaks of a forever type of commitment.

Except...Ben won't stay.

My throat tightens, and I drop my gaze, focusing on why we're in this room to begin with. The concerns of the territory. The fucking Council trying to undo all my hard work. It all leads to the one thing that I've let hang around the periphery of my mind.

I just requested to get pregnant.

However much the courting gift distracted me from that, the gargoyle stepping closer behind me is not deterred. His hunger presses on my skin and surprises me. I didn't assume this would be something he'd want, but he's always surprising me.

A claw catches the chain on my neck, pulling the charm that keeps me from conceiving from my shirt. The metal tickles as it drags against my clammy skin.

"It's not too late to change your mind," he says, offering a respite. Maybe because I've started to tremble.

"It's the right course of action," I say, thinking out loud. "And you said I'm fertile now. My cycles are erratic. If we wait any longer it will probably be couple months before I am again."

I sigh out a breath catching Ben's parted lips as he watches Stoneheart's careful touch.

"We don't have time for second guessing," I say to them as much to myself.

"But do you want it?" Stoneheart rumbles. Probably because my reaction could be taken for either fear or anticipation.

I want kids. I just never planned for it to be like this. Or for a gargoyle's growled question about putting a baby in me to make my belly clench. It would be a relief not to have to assure everyone that this is the right decision, but Stoneheart never makes things easy.

"I want a lot of things." I turn and meet Stoneheart's gaze, breathless at the heat there. The chain and charm connecting us pulls taut.

"I'll work to make every wish a reality." Spoken like a gargoyle who would give me the world, but we both know his limits.

I want you to love me in the same way I'm falling for you. I don't say it aloud, but it reverberates through my soul. I glance at Ben, knowing my wish for him to stay is just as useless. I may not have these men the way I'd want them, but I could have a child and outwit the Council at its own game.

Stoneheart would protect us. He may not be a partner in love, but he's a protector to the very core of his soul.

And I'm not alone. Ben removes his suit coat and places it on the piano before approaching to lean against the bed post, his eyes as dark as I've ever seen them. He's still so buttoned up, but his dress shirt stretches

across his chest with each fierce breath. His body is strung tight with the seductive energy that spinning among the three of us.

We're doing this. There are no doubts I'm willing to hear.

"I want it," I say.

Stoneheart's nostrils flare, and the chain snaps. I gasp, but the bite of the metal pulling my skin is gone as soon as it begins. He takes a step back and places the broken chain and medallion in his kilt pocket, claiming it.

"Then you'll have no problem saying exactly what you're asking for," he says.

I blink in surprise. "What?"

My husband's expression is dangerous. The greed there twists something low in my core.

Stoneheart arches a brow. "Ask us to kindly take advantage of your sweet slickness and breed you."

My mouth drops open. "You're going to make me beg for this?"

"I'm going to make you do what you enjoy most." And the knowing look he gives me makes me want to snarl.

My cheeks burn at his assertion. *Asshole!* As if this plan isn't exactly what we need. As if I'm not doing him a favor at all.

The anger falters as quickly as it flashes because this isn't me doing a favor for him. This is us working together. Yes, a baby will stabilize the territory, but it's also something uniquely mine that he is giving me.

But the satisfaction crinkling the corners of his eyes is telling. He's going to want more than just my begging, and I'm going to want to give more. To submit. It's my natural state around him. But it's also a vulnerability.

As if reading my mind as much as my body, my husband invades my space, his wings rising, touching me with shadow and nothing else. Instead of haughty lust, his expression is one of understanding even as his words are hard.

"This is the cost for your request. By the end of this, I will own you whether you agree or not."

I rock back on my heels, the words running over my skin like foreplay. Unlike when he mentioned owning me in the town car, I have more clarity. Stoneheart will never discard me. I'm more than an object to him. Just

because I don't have his heart, doesn't mean I don't own him as much as he wants to claim me.

The decision is whether I trust him... which I do.

And in that trust is understanding.

He needs this game, the rules it offers, the distance.

I need it too, for different reasons. I don't want to resist this pull anymore. And if I'm diving into the deep end, I want it to be on my terms.

I lift my chin, taking in Stoneheart and Ben as I reach behind me and unzip my dress. I tug the fabric free, and their eyes lick down my exposed skin as the dress falls to the floor. The whisper of the cloth over skin has my nipples pressing hard against the lace of my bra.

I kick the garment away and catch the shadow of Ben's Adam's apple as he swallows. His expression bolsters me. He's not watching me strip to my unprotected layer, he's witnessing a celestial phenomenon. Something awe worthy.

And this moment is awe worthy, dammit.

Stoneheart remains frozen in place, neither smug at my actions or ready to take over. He waits, curious and guarded as if I'm a falling star that will rip him to shreds.

Now that I've started, I don't want to stop. An energy builds behind my breastbone. I unhook my bra and shrug that off. My wet panties follow even as they try to cling to my inner thighs.

My breathing is loud in my ears, and the air over my bare skin causes goose bumps to break out.

A pleased purr escapes Stoneheart but cuts off when I kneel. I nearly gasp when my knees sink into the lush rug. The slight burn of the fibers digging into my skin sets off a reaction that has my legs squeezing together.

Every sensation is magnified like this.

The flare of surprise in the gargoyle's eyes is gratifying, and he doesn't wipe it away. His carefully controlled demeanor is cracking because of me. Because I'm kneeling before him and planning on shattering whatever resistance in this game he's going to play with my next words.

"Please." My voice starts out hoarse, and I clear my throat past the curious mix of humiliation and need. "Fuck a baby into me, Remy."

The silence of the room has me continuing. “I need it. Need both of you to use me.” The emptiness in my core attests to the truth. “Fill me up to the brim.”

Ben makes a sound and adjusts himself.

Stoneheart shifts his footing in front of me like he wants nothing more than to spring.

It’s in this submissive position that I feel the power I have over him, the reason he’s so careful not to give me any pleasure past skin deep.

I don’t resist my compulsion to touch him. His thighs are thick with muscle and hot under my hands. I’ve felt him before this, but this is the first time I’ve let myself sink into the experience. When I knelt before him in the town car it had only been about reclaiming power. This is that, but also something more. I’m giving as much as he is, and that makes me notice the finer details.

His skin is thicker than a human’s, with a rougher texture that takes me by surprise. I glance up at him, but he doesn’t move to stop me as I glide my hands higher, under his kilt. The back of my hand brushes the tip of his hard cock before I pull away.

His lip lifts as if he’s going to give me a verbal correction for stopping, but I quickly unhook his kilt and let it drop. He may be attempting to hide his reactions, but the erection straining toward me can’t lie.

I keep my eyes on him as I give the head of his cock an open kiss before licking it. It’s velvety and hot, and Stoneheart’s fists clench near his thighs, ready to grab or demand more of me. I rub my tongue along him again, licking up the bead of precum that forms.

The tension amplifies, waiting for a reaction from my gargoyle. I cast my eyes to the side and watch Ben grind his palm down on his own erection, and I regret in this instant having only one mouth and being in a power struggle with Stoneheart.

I want these men on either side of me, touching and invading how they wish.

But first, I want this gargoyle to break.

When Stoneheart’s claws sink into my hair, and he forces me to take him deeper, it’s a relief. I make a greedy sound and suck him further down, falling into the guidance I crave and making me feel powerful even while on my knees.

“Fuck, Stella,” he growls, and I hum in delight at the unguarded sound of it.

He fucks my mouth in leisurely strokes. Each one allowing me to sink deeper into the role I want. I moan as I’m gifted more of his flavor, nearly on edge of my own release at the idea that he’s going to fill me with cum when all is said and done. When he presses against the back of my throat I gag, and my body tightens almost peaking from the power play alone.

That seems to lift the spell I have over him, and he clears his throat. “This is a treat, but it’s hardly the way to get you pregnant.”

My cheeks burn even as I want to pout at how composed he sounds now.

I slowly let his cock fall from my lips. “Whatever you say, sir.”

His fist in my hair tightens, and his eyes narrow. For some reason, he didn’t like that. Or perhaps it’s the way I’m rebelliously staring at him, daring him to give me his worst.

If I’m giving him my everything, I want reciprocation. Even if he’s never going to love me.

He pulls me to my feet. The action is so abrupt I nearly stumble, but he doesn’t let me fall. Instead, he kisses me. It’s a punishing kiss, instructing me not to push him.

I open my mouth for him and taste all his conflicting emotions that make for such a unique profile.

When I’m under his dominance, I’m whole. My heart beats for him and Ben in corresponding thuds.

That’s the vulnerability that’s so hard to visit.

But we’re trying to make a baby. It’s fitting that it can’t be as cut and dry as the physicality of it.

The kiss breaks, and Stoneheart frowns like he’s confused that when we touch there’s no subsiding of craving. It just increases. I lean forward and keep my voice low.

“When it’s like this, you feel closer to me than the blood under my skin no matter how much of a distance you want to keep,” I say. “*That* is the cost of this.”

Stoneheart’s frown deepens, and a clearing throat distracts both of us.

“I should go,” Ben says, his cheeks flushed from watching us, but he’s drawn the wrong conclusion from our push and pull. This isn’t something

that's just between the two of us.

Stoneheart growls in frustration. The sound seizes something in my chest, and Ben freezes.

With his grip on my arms, Stoneheart throws me on the bed. I yelp as I bounce across the comforter. "Leave if you must, but my wife has been on the receiving end of both of our generousities without doing the proper work for it. I think it's time that she experiences some delayed satisfaction. Don't you, Barnes?"

Ben jolts at Stoneheart's use of his surname, but it cements my certainty. This gargoyle is holding back with the both of us.

I'm so busy decoding him that it takes a moment for the words to sink in.

I flip the hair out of my face and purse my lips, clinging to some semblance of control even with Stoneheart's manhandling. "I'm not one for orgasm denial."

"You'll suffer through if you want to feel your demon inside of you. To have his cock stretch and prepare you to take me."

I frown, but Stoneheart continues.

"If it gets too much, say red." His smile is sly and full of fang. "But we both know you won't. You don't want to be coddled."

It's annoying when he's right. I lift my chin to the two of them and sit up. My toes curl at the sensation of the velvet blanket under my bare ass.

"You want me to fuck her? Don't you think that's risky with the charm being off?" Ben asks, averting his eyes like he's still on the edge of leaving.

Stoneheart shrugs like his own body isn't tight with need. "Gargoyles are more fertile than demons as a rule." Mischief flashes in his eyes. "And you're good at not coming when you're told."

Ben shudders at the reminder of the first time his body joined mine, and I bite my lip.

"Please, Ben," I say. I want him to stay and play this game with us. I want as much of him as he's willing to give.

It takes a moment, but Ben nods and unbuttons his shirt in efficient movements. I move to meet him on the edge of the bed. The darkness in his gaze spreads as it runs over my body.

He's never seen me nude. The instinct to curl my legs up and hide my bare body from him is second nature, but he catches my ankle, halting me.

"Don't hide. You're a thing of beauty. Let me see you like this," he says, and I freeze. Ben releases my ankle, stroking the skin there before he finishes removing his shirt.

The touch and sight distract me from the insecurity that he'll find me lacking now that he's seen all of me. Or at the very least not worth the drama of being involved with Stoneheart.

Fuck. The lines of Ben's body are sharp and strong. My eyes run down the lines of his chest, until they reach where his pants are still in place. His cock is hard against the material, and I can't stop the soft rock of my hips, trying to appease the liquid desire brimming over.

"You want her ready to take you?" Ben asks Stoneheart, like we're in a business negotiation.

"And begging to come," Stoneheart adds, nearing within a step of us.

Ben grips behind my knees and pulls my thighs wide. I don't think to tense before he's kneeling on the floor at the edge of the bed, bringing his face close to my pussy.

I start to argue, needing to be filled, but cut off on a curse when his mouth descends to my wet core. I slam my eyes shut, and my back arches on the bed. The blare of pleasure on my already primed senses is a ragged sound that I echo with my voice.

The hot tongue licking through my folds doesn't detract from talon tipped finger threading through my hair before gripping me. My eyes snap open to Stoneheart's satisfied face.

"Eyes open, wife. You don't want to miss any of this," he says.

The sight of Ben devouring me while Stoneheart watches is almost too much. My lower belly clenches as my hips grind into Ben's face.

Ben lashes his tongue deep inside me and the roiling pressure that gathered when I begged them to put a baby inside of me nearly breaks through.

Stoneheart makes a sound, and Ben pulls away.

"No!" I choke and try to grab hold of the demon between my legs, but Stoneheart keeps his grip on my hair, keeping me from doing anything more than writhe.

"So sensitive. You almost already came," Stoneheart admonishes.

I'm gasping when I look up at my husband, eyes wide, ready to beg, but he's having none of my expression.

"You can take more," he says. "Don't shorten our fun because of your impatience."

I whimper at a touch to my inner thigh and glance down. Ben watches me with a teasing gleam in his eyes. His lips kiss the tender skin there, and the extra stimulation is not helping.

I hate orgasm denial...but love it. No one but these two would ever push me this far. It makes me want to scream but to also lay in wait for the promised prize.

"I think you're both enjoying this too much," I say.

I feel Ben's smile against my skin. "For as long as I live, I'll never forget how stunning you are right before you come."

His words are full of gratitude but make me frown. There's a concern dancing at the back of my mind, but it's forgotten when his mouth engulfs my pussy again. This time, his fingers press inside my body.

There's an ache from taking Stoneheart this morning, but that just makes the pleasure sink deeper, sharper.

I grab the fist that Stoneheart has in my hair, and my spine bows as the sudden stimulation nearly throws me off the cliff of release again.

But Ben is already pulling away, surprise on his face. My cheeks burn at the responsiveness of my body when I'm between the two of them.

"Ah," Stoneheart says in understanding. "Best build the penetration slowly. She received a fucking earlier that's made her sensitive."

A sound escapes my throat, tight with embarrassment.

Instead of appearing offended that I let my husband fuck me, Ben inhales and gives one last deliberate stroke of his over my clit that causes me to tense, but it's not enough to give me the release that I'm aching for.

"I should probably start to stretch her out with my cock then. It's smoother than my fingers." His voice is hoarse, but the tone is still casual, and that has my toes curling in a mixture something dark in my stomach that wants them to put me on all fours and use my body to bring theirs to completion.

Stoneheart hums in agreement. I stare at the gargoyle above me to distract me from the sound of a belt being undone, his gaze is full of a voracious satisfaction.

My body shakes when the air between my thighs warms with Ben's presence.

"You'll be a good pet and let him fuck you, won't you?" Stoneheart asks, his lips curving with his tease as my body tightens.

I nod. "Yes, sir."

The rounded head of a hot cock notches at my opening, and I don't have the self control to keep looking away. Ben kneels between my open thighs. His eyes are black with his nature and shadows cling to him. I barely have time to admire his ruddy cock before he thrusts inside me.

The penetration is thick and smooth, and it's a mindfuck to feel the soreness Stoneheart left inside me brush against the new sensation of the heavy stretch of Ben.

"Oh, gods," I whisper.

Stoneheart's chuckle is raspy. "They're not here."

The sound spurs our bodies to move like we're his puppets. I moan as Ben's next thrust hits me deeper.

The tension on my hair loosens, and Stoneheart leans away when Ben falls forward. His expression is intense and otherworldly, but his touch is familiar even as our bodies have never touched so completely before.

His kiss tastes like love and even though I know he considers it a temporary emotion for him, I'm as hungry for it as he is for me.

The illusion that these men are only using me dissolves on Ben's tongue. He'll never be the one who can hide his feelings from me.

And this feels like a goodbye.

He fucks into my body like he'd rather give up breathing than fucking me, and it's nearly enough to distract me from the sensation that he's taking as much as he can now so he can leave.

I gasp as I break the kiss and whisper the words that need to be said. "You'll always have a place with us."

Stoneheart approaches Ben's back, watching my face and no doubt enjoying the sight of his two toys fucking. He aches his brow at my statement, but only nods in agreement. Not that Ben is paying attention. His gaze is where his cock is wetly forging into my pussy.

I grip his hair, not being gentle with pulling his demonic gaze up to meet mine. And repeat the words I should have demanded to exist before we reached this point. "Ben. You'll always have a place with us."

Ben's expression shifts but shutters before I can divine his reaction, but at least I know he heard me this time.

Now when he kisses me, I tell myself that it's different than the goodbye from before, even if my ability to tell has become murky with my own rising need.

Ben groans against my mouth, but his thrusts slow. "Wish I could fill you like he will. Mark you."

My heart pangs. "Me too."

I glance at Stoneheart, not wanting to offend him, but he only nods, like it makes the most sense in the world for us to want Ben's seed inside me. To want Ben to mark me in a way that would stake some ownership.

"Fuck," Ben stills inside me, holding his breath. His cock is ridiculously hard, and I imagine he's making a permanent shape against my insides. He's close, but the idea of him leaving this embrace is intolerable.

"A little more," I say, trying not to rock my hips like my body demands. "Please."

Ben groans in obvious strife.

Stoneheart drags his teeth over Ben's tense shoulder, he must have his front against Ben's back. "You can give her another stroke, can't you?"

I feel like we all watch as Ben slowly thrusts inside me again, going so deep that our bodies are flush. His cock swells, and I imagine what it will feel like for him to come this deep inside me.

I'll experience that soon. The pressure of hot seed filling me up as deep as it will go. There won't be anything to stop it from flowing into me and taking root.

Breeding me.

I make a helpless sound. The idea of being claimed so deeply by either of them has the orgasm they've both been teasing me with rushing to the surface, and my pussy clenches around a cursing Ben in a necessary if foolish compulsion to capture him. Ben yanks himself away suddenly, and I sob at the loss. A hot splash of fluid hits my inner thigh and the sheets between us.

"Fuck, that was close," he gasps, falling on his side beside me.

Stoneheart croons, taking Ben's place between my legs. "But you performed admirably. See how wet and desperate she is for us. She likes

the idea of taking load after the load.” He presses the pad of his thumb against my sopping center, rubbing deeper before bringing the excess of my wetness, the proof that these men make me weak, up to my clit and massaging it in soft circles.

“She’s so open.” Stoneheart’s eyes glint with wanting, and I spread my thighs wider, accepting his words for the fact they are.

Ben’s attention is locked on where my husband touches me. “This is dangerous.”

“But that’s part of the fun. Allowing yourself to feel her and holding back while everything you want to stay inside her and leave your mark. The denial is a type of pain that makes you hard.”

The truth of those words is in Ben’s swallow. I half expect him to disappear on us, but he doesn’t. Instead, he grits his teeth, pulling his gaze from my pussy and runs his hand up my thigh to where he’d left his mess. Instead of wiping the cum away, he rubs it into the skin.

I moan.

Stoneheart’s laugh is playful. “Bet you wish you weren’t wearing that scent blocking charm now.”

“I feel my energy on her, and it’s enough,” he glares at Stoneheart and something in the gargoyle’s expression flickers. I think he’s going to tackle the demon to the bed and bestow his own energy on him, but he pulls his attention back, focusing on me again.

My skin tingles, but he doesn’t give me much time to anticipate.

Stoneheart picks me up. “We’ll let your knight do his duty and comfort you.”

My mouth opens in question, but he turns me toward Ben and I’m straddling him, my pussy brushing his already hard again cock, and he hisses. A large hand grips the back of my neck and pushes me forward until my hands bracket Ben’s face.

I press my forehead against Ben’s, needing the small consolation while my insides ache with emptiness. He makes a shushing noise I don’t understand until Stoneheart pulls my hips up and his giant cock presses against where Ben left me soft and needy.

I moan, my lashes fluttering shut at the heated head of my husband pushing into my body. He’s already slick with precum and the thought of that has my pussy clasp him in need.

“Easy does it, wife,” Stoneheart grits. “If you’re too tight I could hurt you.”

I try to relax, and he sinks deeper. The sensation is breathtaking and fully presses the ache of what he did to me this morning, forcing me to soften more, give more.

My lips tremble as the sharp stretch works its way to a duller one. A soft brush on my mouth has me opening my eyes to take in Ben’s captive expression. He kisses me again, and I moan into it as Stoneheart retreats and forges forward with an impatient thrust, the smacking sensation of his knot against my pussy the only hint of how the feel of my body is effecting him.

Ben’s hands go down to brace my thighs for Stoneheart’s thrusts, and I’m locked between the two of them in a way that has the interrupted orgasm from earlier rising to the surface and preparing my body for what I need to take with a gush.

“You’re so beautiful,” he whispers against my lips, giving me the vocal validation I’m craving since Stoneheart has been silent.

I shudder and sink my shoulders lower, giving Stoneheart the better angle. Submitting to the drag of his girthy cock inside of me.

Stoneheart growls, and I hold my breath for his composure to crumble, but he remains quiet. It distracts me from the overwhelming feeling of being trapped between them.

“You’re taking him so well,” Ben says. He nips my lower lip to bring me back before continuing, “He’s going to breed you so deeply no one will doubt his possession of you.”

“*Fuck*,” I whimper, tightening around the shaft of the silent gargoyle behind me, but he only thrusts deeper.

I growl in frustration and whip my head around to glare at Stoneheart. “Are you bored back there?”

He halts his hips and narrows his eyes. “Does it feel like I’m bored.” He punches his hips sharply, and I cry out.

“Feels like you’ve gone to sleep,” I say, even though my voice is high as I dare my husband to really fuck me.

He growls, and it takes effort not to roll my eyes to the back of my head with the swell of need that the sound pulls from my body. Excitement

flares from the pit of my stomach and travels outward until the skin of my feet tingles.

But he's keeping his distance still, and that's unacceptable.

"If you can't breed a baby into me, then perhaps I should find someone else who can," I say.

Ben sighs, and I don't know if it's from exasperation with me or Stoneheart. But the next deafening growl from Stoneheart has the two of us moaning. My breasts rub against Ben, and I raise my hips higher in my squirming.

Then Stoneheart really starts to fuck me. There's no slow roll of hips, this is messy and loud. I cry out, but he doesn't slow.

"Is my wife getting bored with me and our demon so quickly? Do you need a reminder that you're ours?" Stoneheart grinds his knot against my entrance, and I nearly dissolve in whimpers.

"No," I gasp. My thighs shake, but Ben holds me steady for each impact of the growly gargoyle. It's a surprise his knot hasn't somehow slipped in with the force of his movements. "I want you with me."

The cock that's rearranged my insides hardens even more, and I breathlessly wail knowing what's coming.

He hisses. "Now you have me."

My husband's cock swells and throbs as he comes. Heat and pressure build deep in my belly, adding to the considerable stretch.

His fist grips his knot but presses against my pussy like he's trying to keep that errant part of anatomy from invading me but can't stop the temptation of trapping his release inside me through other means. He groans and pulses again, and I moan low in my throat at the unforgiving pressure.

"Holy fuck," I sob.

Ben huffs a laugh. "I'd hardly call this holy."

I try to laugh, but the hot release filling me starts to spill out. Stoneheart starts to pull away and his seed gushes from me and onto Ben who's stopped laughing and moans while watching the sight.

I can hardly focus on that because with the new emptiness comes a confusing rush of feelings. A gaping loss yawns in my chest, and I make a confused whimper.

I need.

I try to move my hips, but neither Stoneheart's grip on my hips or Ben's hold on my thighs release me.

The sob that had been from satisfaction before rises in my throat with an odd panic and turns into a whine. I'm so fucking empty. It's as if I've become a sucking blackhole. The warmth of the moment is gone, and every muscle in my body attempts to curls in on itself.

"Stella?" Ben's voice seems distant from the sensations raging through me.

I've experienced this sensation before, but it wasn't nearly as world ending as it is now.

"Your knot," I pant, looking back in desperation at my husband. "I need you to knot me."

Stoneheart's lips purse, and he shakes his head. My eyes squeeze shut. My throat swells with the thought that no matter how bare and stripped to my soul I am, he still won't risk knotting me.

And in the wave of emotion coming down from this high there's only despair. I'm drowning.

This is more than the denial of this morning. This is rejection on a soul-deep level.

Tears start to gather in my eyes. Ben shushes me, trying to avert the crash of my reaction with soft kisses on my cheeks. At my sob, he changes tactics. The world turns as I'm flipped onto my back.

Ben's flushed face is determined and takes up all of my vision. "Stay with me, love."

The tears in my eyes start to pool, but Ben's warm body above mine shifts. I feel the brush of his fingers on my inner thigh before his hard knuckles press against my messy pussy.

"Oh!" Surprise is a flash but disappears into a heavy sensation as his too-wide fist grinds against me. My head falls back on a groan, but I keep my gaze on his.

Ben rumbles in satisfaction. "That's it. Relax for me."

It's not a knot, but with each rotation of his wrist he stretches me. I only feel his first two knuckles, but it's enough to give my body the pressure it's begging for. The crushed part of my soul that needed the intimacy of Stoneheart's body being locked inside mine is being fed. Each

moment brings soothing mini orgasms flowing over my body and allowing the tension drawing me tight to ease.

After a few minutes the worst of it is gone, and embarrassment rushes to the surface.

“I don’t know what happened,” I say, my cheeks burning.

Talons comb through my hair, and I let my eyes flutter shut to avoid looking at the gargoyle just yet. “Just some haywire instincts that I didn’t realize would affect you quite so strongly. My apologies, firefly. You’re taking him so well.”

I peek down my body and moan at the sight of Ben’s fist pressing against me. The driving need to want him deeper dissipates. I start to relax just as I register the flush in Ben’s cheeks and the clench of his jaw as he watches his fist massage me.

There’s movement, and Ben makes a surprised sound. Stoneheart wraps his hand around Ben’s cock, stroking the demon.

“Such a good demon doing exacting what she needs,” he says. “He surely deserves a prize, doesn’t he?”

I nod, floaty and satisfied as Ben’s body strings even tighter above me. My hands stroke his face and until the moment he breaks.

“Stella,” he gasps, before crashing his lips down on mine and muffling his shout with our kiss, the splash of his release on my stomach further soothing me for some reason. Maybe because no matter what happens in this bed or outside of it, there’s a comforting truth that we’re in this together.

BEN

MY FINGERS STROKE the white keys of the piano without pressing down. The room is dim with the light of dawn. I should go. I should have left last night after Stoneheart cleaned us up with a washcloth while Stella and I were in a post orgasm stupor, but Stella's hand had found mine as I was pulling away to leave the bed, and I could no more ignore her whispered pleas for me stay than the beating of my own heart.

So, I stayed, and we all showered together. We ordered takeout and discussed nothing more consequential than our favorite movies. The interaction felt needed after the intensity of the sex.

Stoneheart had been quiet for much of the odd date, adding a sly quip or suggestive turn of phrase here and there, obviously not used to keeping conversations from becoming work related, but his touches sang of satisfaction. And those he freely bestowed.

The shower had been the most challenging to keep from rising to all the affectionate touches, but by the time we'd pulled up a movie on a tablet in bed together, my skin was humming with delayed need.

The urgency of needing to breed Stella had taken a backseat now that Stoneheart had fucked her properly without the presence of the charm, but that didn't stop us from tossing the movie away halfway through to do the dance again.

And here I sit in a bedroom that's not mine wearing nothing but boxer briefs in front of a piano that neither of the inhabitants play after spending the night in a married couple's bed.

Stella's still asleep, but Stoneheart was gone before I woke. It should have been difficult to sleep with him on the other side of Stella, to have his wing draped over the two of us, but it wasn't.

It felt like home.

"You'll always have a place with us." Is what Stella had said, but it's not a sentiment I can afford. Even if it feels like with each moment together, the two of them dip their fingers into the inkwell of my heart and leave smudgy fingerprints on my soul.

"You never did thank me for the piano," Stoneheart says softly from behind, and I start with surprise. I'm truly a terrible bodyguard that I didn't notice him entering from the balcony.

"It's not mine," I say back just as softly. I turn in my seat and look to the bed. Stella still lays there, sleeping deep.

"It could be." It's hard to see him in the low light, his features are in shadow with the windows behind him even as he nears, but his nature is clear in his movements.

I clear my throat and ignore the statement, moving on to a different thought I've been pondering.

"You're withholding your knot from her?" I ask.

He doesn't confirm it, but he doesn't have to. He turns, and the slight clench of his jaw catching the light is enough.

I focus on the keys again. "What you told me before is applicable here." This is something I need to dig into. When Stoneheart doesn't say anything, I continue. "With the way you watch her when she's not looking, there's no part of you that won't be unscathed by this"

I don't know why he's holding back, and part of me doesn't care. Stella deserves better. I'm temporary, but he's her husband. It's not fair for both of us to deny her the mate she needs. Her body cries out for him, and all I can do is offer poor comfort.

But I'm realizing that's why he wants me here. To provide comfort. To give Stella a place to stow the feelings of her heart. And I want to give her that while I can. For the woman who deserves everything, I'll give her my all.

For now.

Maybe I'll even convince a gargoyle to give her the love match she merits by the time their heir is conceived.

“How did Kalos accomplish the tight hold he has on your loyalty? The rumors around you are rather lacking.” Stoneheart doesn’t respond to my statement, but I know he’s heard it.

I roll my eyes at his change of subject. I can only hope he considers my words. Nothing will ever make this gargoyle do something he doesn’t want to. “It’s not like it’s a secret.”

Stoneheart arches a brow.

I shrug. “I was told that my mother abandoned me when my demonic traits started showing. So I survived by doing odd jobs and from the charity of others. It was one such job that Kalos caught a hold of me.”

It had actually taken a few run-ins for me to listen to the dragon and trust what he was offering. I had the ability to teleport then as I do now, and there was no way he would have been able to hold me if I didn’t want to be held.

“He offered safety...” I clear my throat. “He took me under his wing, shared his home and allies. He’s the only one I can point to who raised me.”

“And so you owe him your eternal servitude?”

I glare at the piano. “He’s my family.”

“He’s stopping you from living a full life with the woman you love.” Stoneheart leans against the piano, but I don’t look up at him.

“Funny. I thought the gargoyle she married had more to do with that.” I don’t deny that I love Stella, but loving someone doesn’t solve anything. My duty is to my family.

Stoneheart scoffs. “Did you hear me contradict her last night?”

“You’ll always have a place with us.”

“I didn’t hear you make any offers of your own,” I say to distract myself from the memory of those words, but Stoneheart doesn’t reply.

My curiosity gets the better of me, and I glance at him. He’s grinning at me, and the wicked curve of his lips is captivating.

“That’s because you’re not ready for that.”

Frustration at the games he’s playing rises at the back of my throat in what would be a silent growl.

“Are you going to play for us?” Stella’s sleepy voice startles us both.

I hesitate and nearly laugh at myself. The boundaries that I set for myself with these two are strict, but I can’t be a hypocrite and hide my

vulnerabilities after promising I'd give her my all.

"Wouldn't it wake the others?" I ask, thinking of the other people who live in this penthouse who didn't see me enter this room, but surely have their suspicions.

Stella huffs a laugh. "I can only hope the walls are more soundproof than that with how vocal you two had me last night."

Stoneheart's lips twitch. "They are. Though it would be convenient if that Leonid spy heard your pleasure so we can attempt to test the limits."

He looks delighted at the challenge. Stella throws one of the smaller pillows at him, and he catches it.

"None of your ideas before coffee," she says.

My brows rise, and Stoneheart and I exchange a glance. That wasn't a no.

I'm stalling, and for some reason Stoneheart is letting me. Perhaps because the last time I refused to play for her, Stella was hurt.

She possesses more of that gargoyle than he knows

But I won't hurt her by keeping this part of my soul from them. While I'm here, my heart is hers. And Stoneheart...he can have whatever is left.

I play, starting soft with a pretty melody that makes me think of dawn. I'm self-taught and have never performed for anyone. Music is something that is wholly mine, and now I'm sharing it. The process is more anxiety-inducing than I expected.

But as the music swells in my chest, the tightness in my throat from these two being my audience begins to fade, and I'm lost to it.

To wildflowers and dark stormy nights. The composition starts as a simple tune but morphs into something else. Something dark that intertwines with light and speaks of hope and impending grief in a sweeping melody.

I'm interrupted by large hands pulling me from the piano bench and gripping either side of my face. And like the music, I lose myself to Stoneheart's kiss.

Fangs scrape my lips, and my chest presses against his harder one as I clutch him to me, skin against skin, heart to heart, and allow him to devour me. There's something to the act that almost feels angry, but I don't know why.

It's all tongues and teeth, and I'm completely engrossed.

I have to break the kiss to gasp for breath, but he doesn't release the grip he has on my face.

"What a talented little songbird you turned out to be," he says, and the frustration I see burning on his face confuses me.

The sound of rustling sheets has both of us looking toward the bed. Stella's expression is one caught between wonder and lust. Her eyes watery, and her cheeks flushed.

"That was beautiful," she says, and my cheeks prickle. I don't know for a moment if she means the music or the kiss. Part of me thinks it's a remark about both.

"Hungry so soon?" Stoneheart teases, any hint of the frustration from before has been wiped away.

Stella bites her lips. Her thighs slide together under the sheets as if she needs to release the tension between them, but she winces.

"Sore?" Stoneheart asks and she hesitates before nodding.

"But I want more," she says. "A little pain is okay. I'm just not as greedy about it as Ben is."

The burn in my cheeks spreads to my ears, and Stoneheart tsks, giving me a warning look to stay put before releasing me to walk to the bed. Without ceremony he pulls the sheet that she has clutched to her breasts away, and my heart skips at the reveal of the expanse of her skin and soft curves.

She yelps in surprise as the demanding gargoyle pulls her to lay flat and gestures for her to spread her legs.

Stella's breath catches as her thighs fall open without hesitation. I groan from my vantage point but don't move from the spot where her husband left me.

Her pussy is wet and puffy, but the pink-red color speaks of the arduous use it received last night as we bred her.

"Your cunt is rather abused," Stoneheart muses and lowers into a kneel, bringing his face close in a way that has me swallowing envy. My mouth waters from the memory of her taste. "I've been remiss in caring for you. I'll get some proper healing ointment for the job, but in the meantime—"

The breath Stella hisses in is a mixture of pain and pleasure as his long-tapered tongue licks through her folds.

Stoneheart's chest rumbles, and he lifts to hover, a string of saliva descends from his mouth and pools on Stella's waiting pussy. Her face flames red as he brings her hand to cover the mess. "Let that soak in and heal what it can. Maybe by the time I'm done with our demon you can bear me again."

"Fuck," I whisper, remembering that gargoyle saliva has healing properties.

"Well now I care much less about the pain," she breathes.

His lips pull into a grin. "Patience, firefly, it doesn't do to be greedy. Not when Ben has been so generous."

Both of their gazes land on me, and the burning desire low in my gut escapes to run rampant through my veins.

In a flash, he's on me again. He grips my hair near my scalp this time to tilt my face how he wants before returning to kissing me.

My sound of surprise is drowned out by the thundering of my heart in my ears, and my mouth opens against his. I don't know his intention with these kisses, but I don't care. My arms wrap around his body, and I grind myself against him. The kilt he wears offering friction against the thin fabric of my underwear.

I haven't received attention like this from him before. There's always been Stella between us, or quick and angry kisses interspersed with moments of pain. This feels like he's going to take his time with me, and that's the type of terrifying thought that causes the base of my spine to tingle and the rest of my body to become pliant.

Claws dig into the space between my shoulder and throat, and I break the kiss with a cry of sharp pain as my skin gives way to blood.

The sting makes my eyes water, and I open my mouth, but the complaint in my throat stops at the flicker of something familiar in Stoneheart's pale gaze. I'm sure I'm mistaken about the same glint of possessiveness he gets when Stella isn't looking directed at me, but his words distract me.

"So obedient this morning. Quite a difference from yesterday."

I huff a pained laugh. That's what this is about? Me bringing Stella back to the penthouse earlier than he wished? But a part of me isn't surprised. I wanted his punishment.

“I can take direction if the motivation is right,” I say with false bravado.

My eyes don’t match my tone and are glued to him licking the red from the tips of his dark claws. The vibrant color stands out on the purple of his tongue. *My blood*. He’s tasting my very essence like a connoisseur and makes a rumbling hum of pleasure at the flavor.

My cock throbs painfully harder.

I don’t try to fight him when he pulls my head to the side and licks the stinging punctures his claws left. I moan at the warm slide of his tongue over the wounds, the tapered end pressing against one hard enough to make the muscles in my back tense as if to escape before the sting becomes a dull throb, and I gasp in relief.

“And now you bear my mark,” he says, entirely too satisfied.

The punctures are where a mating mark would go.

I’m about to spiral into confusing thoughts about what that means, but he pulls our bodies together, and the grind of his own erection against mine has my mind emptying.

When he lifts me, I’m unprepared, already dizzy with arousal. He pushes me away and the world tilts as I fall. The bed catches me, the scent and feel of the sheets against my back already familiar.

I glance to the side, and Stella is in reaching distance, looking much more awake and mischievous. Stoneheart pulls my underwear down, and the scrape of the elastic waistband against my cock has me exhaling roughly.

Soft hands stroke through my hair, and I look up at Stella. With how she’s leaning forward, the rosy tips of her breasts hang tantalizingly close.

But the bastard of a devil distracts me.

A wet heat covers my cock, and I choke. Stoneheart’s mouth is on me. The light drag of fangs over my stiffness has a cold sweat breaking out on the back of my neck, but my body doesn’t care about danger or pain—if anything, it delights in both.

I look down and the sight of the gargoyle taking me into his mouth is one that makes the bottom of my stomach drop out. Never would I have thought that he’d do this to me.

My hand grabs a gray horn at the next sharp edge that teases my tender skin. Stoneheart arches a challenging brow, but instead of releasing him, I

rub my thumb near the base of it, the spot that my research reported is sensitive.

His eyes glaze over a little, and I moan at the moment of shared pleasure.

The next time he takes me deep, my head falls back. “Fuck.”

His lips stretch into a smile around my shaft. He pulls off me on the next up motion, and I whimper at the loss. His hand continues the action, giving much harder strokes than his mouth allowed.

“That’s it, songbird. Let us both hear you,” he says.

My next moan is desperate.

With a snarl, he rises and pulls me down the bed with my legs on either side of his hips and grips our cocks together. His hand is large enough to encase the both of us, but it’s unforgivingly tight.

“You’re the devil,” I curse, and he laughs. A sound escapes my tight throat, and I can’t help thrusting into the tight ring of his grip.

The throb of his cock against mine and the slick of his saliva makes this action almost as intimate as if he were inside me.

It’s that thought that has my body breaking. My muscles wrench tight, and my back arches. I cry out as liquid fire shoots up my spine. My release splashes against my stomach and chest. The mess of it prolongs the moment like a sweet note.

Stoneheart growls in satisfaction, not stopping his hand from stroking our cocks. Probably wanting to push me past the brink of painful oversensitivity and filling that empty part of myself that wants the pain to join the warring sensations in my chest.

Reality crashes down.

I clutch his wrist. “You can’t come like this.” Even though I want him to cover me in his seed. To mark me with his dark energy for days to accompany the zinging awareness that connects the three of us. “It would be a waste.”

I glance at Stella who’s now squirming where she sits, waiting for her husband’s next command.

Stoneheart’s eyes narrow. “It’d be a waste to mark you like this even though I can smell how much you want me to?”

“It needs to be inside her,” I grit out, embarrassed that he can scent that. I should get a prize for making my brain work when it’s been melted

by orgasm.

Instead of dismissing my words, Stoneheart releases me.

I'm not disappointed. *I'm not*. This is how it has to be.

"Is that where you want me to come, firefly?" he asks Stella, who nods eagerly.

With an inherent grace, she sinks her chest down and raises her ass in the air. Her cheek rests on the bed, her eyes are full of tamed chaos.

"Please."

The complete submission of the position and the blissed-out expression on her face makes me want to be the one filling her, but that's not what I'm here for.

Stoneheart isn't immune to the display, walking to the other side of the bed to take the position behind her. His cock is so hard it's weeping. "Such a pretty little wife with a womb to fill."

His hand caresses the curve of her ass before gripping her hip. He only presses in close enough to drag his cock through her wetness. "Well if our demon doesn't want this seed, it should go to good use."

The jealousy is quick and silly so I'm able to breathe through it with the roll of my eyes. Stoneheart is taunting the both of us with his dirty talk, and somehow it makes losing out on this better, like I'm still involved even though this is between the two of them.

Stella moans into the sheets, rubbing her cheek against the bed as if to calm herself, but she doesn't have to be patient for long.

Stoneheart mounts his wife, and the wet sound of his body cleaving into her makes me gasp and my cock attempt to twitch back to readiness. The appendage is too spent for that, and all I can do is wince at the driving need.

He rolls his hips gently at first, testing her soreness, and when she doesn't wince in discomfort, each thrust becomes harder. Stella's little sounds of pleasure egg him on, and the flow of their bodies is artwork.

Watching him fuck her is the most erotic thing I've ever seen. The only thing that would make this more arousing is if he pressed the swollen knot on his shaft to lock inside her.

I want to see her pussy stretch to engulf it.

The thought of that has tension growing in my lower belly, and I breathe out in exasperation. These two make me insatiable.

Stoneheart smirks at me, probably able to scent how satisfying this is.

Perhaps I could stay around long enough after they conceive, when his seed isn't needed, to feel him inside of me like that.

Stella's cry of completion and Stoneheart's deep growl reverberates through my chest and yanks at my heart as surely as if we're one.

I can only hope the bodily connection and the memories are enough to nurse the gaping hole in my soul they're going to leave when this is done.

STELLA

I SIP my coffee and take in the rare sight before me that I would have missed if I hadn't forgotten my phone. Though a lot of good it does me since I'd forgotten to charge it.

Stoneheart and Ben are still asleep, the gargoyle's arm wrapping around the demon. The positioning of the sheet low over their hips cultivates a warmth in my core that should be extinguished by now.

This is the second day of waking up with them. Though yesterday they both woke before I did.

I'm too energized to stay asleep. I've already been out to eat breakfast and been teased by Fiona about missing the self-defense lessons I'm supposed to be attending every morning. Though she was sure to add that I've obviously been wrestling in the meantime.

Even Silas had cracked a smile at that one.

The fact that everyone in the penthouse seems to be aware that Stoneheart is trying to knock me up did not cause her comment to make me blush any less.

It makes the truth more awkward.

I'm pretty sure my fertility window is over. Stoneheart was just as touchy-feely last night, but it wasn't nearly as driven as it has been. I'm doubly grateful that after Ben seduced the both of us with his music yesterday morning, we accomplished leaving the bed, and I got a head start on making the charms against the fae magic. If I can keep the same pace of work, I may be able to make two of them a day.

Because when I take a moment to breathe and evaluate my magic and my body, I don't sense pregnancy.

Maybe it's too soon to tell, but for a witch, it should be obvious the moment conception happens. Our magic is a part of us from our bodies to our souls.

If Stoneheart's seed didn't take, and I'm no longer ovulating, the charms are the next course of action.

I don't let myself ponder the disappointment. I'm so in my head that I miss Stoneheart's eyes opening.

"You're looking way too smug this morning," Stoneheart says.

"I have two hot men in my bed. I think I deserve to feel smug." I smile and finish my coffee.

Ben hums and stretches, waking up. The fact that neither of them spring away from the other is a sign. The distance Stoneheart has been keeping from the two of us is diminishing.

Maybe when he wakes up more that will change, but it's comforting when his hand flexes on Ben's shoulder before pulling away.

With all the sex and teasing of the last couple of days, there's a clarity that I refuse to ignore.

We belong together. The three of us.

I don't know how we can get Ben to stay or if Stoneheart will ever open his heart, but *this* feels right.

Stoneheart crooks a finger at me, and I hesitate. I just did my hair, but the delicious sight of the two of them rumpled pulls me forward. He takes my coffee mug and places it on the side table before snatching me by the waist and pulling me into the bed.

I shriek, landing with two hard bodies on either side of me, but they only laugh. Ben's hands start pulling off my dress.

"I've already gotten ready for the day," I complain.

"So ready," Ben says, nipping my ear and making me giggle.

Stoneheart puts his mouth over my mating mark, and I sigh in pleasure at the short circuit that spot has to overriding my good intentions. But we have things to do, and I spread my hands against the gargoyle's chest to push him away and somehow get out of this bed full of hands.

"Don't you want to reward your demon for his commendable service?" he asks. "Don't you want for him to finally fill you?"

His words have me stopping long enough for Ben to get my dress off.

“He can come inside me?” I ask as a roundabout way of asking about how fertile my scent is. I don’t want to have the discussion yet that our plan A doesn’t seem have borne fruit.

The question gets Ben’s attention, and he pulls me to straddle him, his hands sliding up my thighs. His cock throbs against my panties to which my pussy immediately responds, making them stick to me with the flush of desire slickening my folds.

I moan as Stoneheart pulls the gusset of my panties aside for Ben’s erection to slide against me.

“Gods,” Ben says. “Please say yes. I’ve been dreaming of this.”

I rock my hips against him, imagining how it would be to be dripping with Ben and Stoneheart’s cum at the same time. My nipples are so hard against my bra that they ache.

We should at least finish getting me naked for a moment like this.

But I can’t wait.

I notch the head of him to me right as the bedroom door swings open, and the world ends.

“Stoneheart—fuck!” Silas’s curse hits me like a bucket of cold water.

I freeze. Ben’s wide eyes meet mine, but there’s a thread of determination there. He’s not leaving me to deal with the fall out of this.

Stoneheart’s wing spreads around us, preserving some modesty, but it’s clear what’s happening, and that it’s not just Stoneheart in bed with me.

“Apologies, my lady, I thought you had started work, but I didn’t know where you’d gone.” Silas sounds like he’s facing away from us. He pauses like he’s regretting all his life decisions. “We have an issue.”

I choke out a sound because this moment seems like it’s never going to end, and Ben runs a hand through my hair to comfort me.

“More of an issue than Kalos’s man being in your bed. Which I’m just so surprised about!” Silas’s voice is dry and slathered with sarcasm so thick it’s audible.

“Silas,” Stoneheart growls. My cheeks burn at apparently how obvious our arrangement has been.

Silas continues, “This can’t wait. It’s an official petition from the dragon for Stella’s presence.”

Stoneheart sits higher and his wing wraps around my back tighter, pressing Ben and I together. Danger rolls off him in waves. “Why?”

Silas takes a hesitant breath. “Stella, your mother has returned.”



“EVERYTHING WILL BE FINE,” Ben says, leaning against the doorjamb of the bathroom. While I fix the damage the two of them did to my hair. “An official petition through Kalos was the best way that she’d know to get to see that you’re safe and whole.”

“Why not just answer the phone?” I ask. Once I connected my phone to a charger, I’d seen the missed calls and texts. My heart hurts at how panicked they sound. I tried to call her back, but she’s not answering.

He shrugs. “Maybe she wants to talk in person? Or maybe she assumes anything you say will be influenced by Stoneheart. She doesn’t know him.”

He says it carefully, and I chew my lip. She doesn’t know if he’s any different from Lorenzo.

I take one more fortifying look into the mirror before turning. “Let’s get this over with.”

Ben holds out his hand, and I make sure to squeeze my eyes shut so I don’t arrive at Kalos’s nauseous. Stoneheart had agreed that it would be best for Ben to take me alone. We don’t want whatever my mother is going to say to get spread around, and Stoneheart trusts Ben to keep me safe.

The air whips around us before settling, and I open my eyes. We’re standing in front of the imposing door of Kalos’s office. I take a steadying breath, and the door swings open, the dragon in question stepping out.

“Oh good, you’re here.” Kalos’s relief is clear. His nostrils flare, and my cheeks heat. I don’t know if I’ll ever get used to the lack of privacy when it comes to paranormal beings with heightened senses, but I live in a territory of shifters, I can get over that he knows exactly what we’ve been doing. “And not too worse for wear. At least she can’t tell how thickly Stoneheart has plastered you with his scent.”

“Kalos,” Ben warns him but doesn’t continue.

The dragon raises a brow at the protective gesture. “That witch has turned my mate against me and demanded I summon another territory leader’s wife through official means. She’s a menace.”

Ben makes a sound. “Don’t make it sound like you’re helpless in the face of one witch.”

Kalos narrows his gaze. “A distraught mother. Do not underestimate that. She was going to kick up a fuss in Stoneheart’s territory, and I assume that would go poorly with what Moon has shared with me.”

Fuck.

“It would have,” I say. I need to see her right now. “Where is she?”

Kalos blows out a breath and turns to lead us away from his office. We move through the mansion that I’m relatively familiar with until we get to the outdoor patio where Katarina has a hand resting on Mom’s.

Mom looks up at me, and I stop.

“Hi,” I say. The greeting all at once too much and wholly inadequate.

I’ve always been happy that we look so similar and that I didn’t take after Lorenzo almost at all, but now that detail is a punch in the face. Her red-rimmed eyes and stark, tempered expression is like peering at my own grief.

It takes a moment of reminding myself that I’m safe and everything has worked out for the best to keep my heart from wavering. I nod to Katarina, who gets up and gives me a hug.

“We’ll leave the two of you to talk,” she says. Ben begins to argue, but Katarina yanks him with her. He lets her after I whisper that it’s okay and probably so he doesn’t upset the pregnant woman’s balance.

When we’re alone, the tension in the room swells. Her worry against my guilt.

“Hi?” Mom asks, and anger is now center stage.

I clear my throat and take Katarina’s seat across from her. “I didn’t want you to find out this way.”

“How would I have found out? I finally reach a place with reception only to receive an email congratulating me on your *wedding*.” Her voice is high, and she purses her lips for a moment as if to calm herself.

I frown, momentarily derailed from the emotion by the detail. “An email? From whom?”

The disbelief on her face would be comical any other time.

“It’s important,” I press.

She narrows her eyes as if to lecture me on what details are actually important, but the surge of her annoyance gives way to exasperation, and she waves her hand with a shrug. “One of the Council members. Mc-something or another. I don’t know him.”

Fuck. When Moon warned that a faction of the Council would try to sow dissention, I did not expect it to come from this direction.

“I thought it was a joke. My daughter would never get married without telling me, to a territory leader no less, and close the business she’d worked so hard on. Not while knowing the dangers of that.” Her cheeks flush with anger. “She’d never send me away for her to do that. That’s not how I raised you.”

I sink lower in my chair, but she’s not done.

“And then Carl told me he worked for Stoneheart—” she breaks off and a shattered expression flashes over her face before she reels it in. “I can’t believe I was so stupid.”

Why didn’t Carl warn Silas that she’d come home early?

“The marriage wasn’t a part of the plan. I sent you away to keep you safe,” I clarify.

“Because you meddled where you shouldn’t have. Kalos told me.”

Gee, thanks for throwing me under the bus. “I saved my friend and her mate.”

“He’s a dragon! He didn’t need your sacrifice.”

I shrug because she’s not going to see my side of things in this. I did something risky, and that goes against everything she taught me.

“I didn’t want this for you,” she says. “I wanted you to be able to live without fear—”

“But I wasn’t,” I break in. “I’ve forever been in his shadow, waiting for the day that someone took notice of me. This way I was able to dictate my fate and get back at what he did to you!”

Mom holds up a pointed finger. “This isn’t about me. This is your own wounded pride. Your revenge was for you.

“It wasn’t just revenge. Kat—”

“It didn’t have to be you!”

“Yes, it did.” My words snap without meaning too. “I was the only one it could be, and despite whatever you think of my revenge, I couldn’t sit

aside and do nothing. Lorenzo had to be held accountable.”

She shakes her head and mutters. “You and your love of justice.”

It’s a break in the tension between us because it harkens back to arguments I’d made even as a child. But the moment doesn’t last.

Mom’s worry bleeds through. “You’ve shoved yourself back into danger. And for what? Have they convinced you they need an heir yet? Do you really think Frank is going to let the likes of you succeed him? He’ll kill you as soon as your guard is dropped.”

I’m a little too stunned by the heir comment to have an immediate rebuttal, but that doesn’t stop her.

“These people are vipers. You’ve never had to deal with politics.” Mom shakes her head and corrects herself. “Ariel isn’t mean spirited, but she’s not to be trusted. The territory will always come first.”

It’s eerie to have hidden so much from her, but for her to know more about this life than I did when I embarked on this marriage. She could have been a resource if I’d been open with her.

But would she have helped when she’d never support what I’ve done?

“What if the child you have isn’t a gargoyle?” she asks, and I silently choke. What does she know about Ben? There are tears in her eyes, but she ruthlessly wipes them away. “What if what happened to me happens to you? Will your husband be thrilled to raise a witch?”

I breathe and try not to show the relief on my face. I’m not ashamed of Ben being in our bed, but if even my mother knew, we’d have trouble.

“I trust Stoneheart,” I say. There’s no telling if an heir is even possible at this point. A fact that makes me itchy.

Her worry dries and anger flashes. “Trusting men has never gotten us very far.”

I shake my head, and even though each issue she raises pokes at my own insecurities, I don’t regret what I’ve done. Even if it has hurt her.

“I’m sorry, Mom.”

She continues as if I haven’t spoken because my apology doesn’t make a difference. “And the shifters! They only respond to hierarchy. Do you think they will accept your presence over Frank?”

Frank Leonid. Brother to a man who sold his own people to pay gambling debts. Ally to whatever fae lord is buying said people, and all-around shitty person.

She thinks that I can't be a better leader than him?

Now I'm angry.

"How could you—" she starts, but I cut in. If she's not willing to listen, this conversation isn't going to do anything other than dig the divide between us deeper.

"This is my territory, and they are my people," I say. "I get it. I hurt you by keeping you in the dark about this because I knew you'd never agree."

Mom purses her lips and a little part of me dies to be losing the approval of my biggest champion.

I soldier on, "And this might be too much for you to take right now, but I can do this."

I need to do this.

And no naysayers, not even my mother, are going to stop me.

BEN

THE SHOP is an oddity in this modern age. It doesn't try to hide itself as anything other than what it is—a place of magic and growing things. The air is humid and what shelves don't house labeled bottles of every shape and size, carry plants. The scent is an unlikely mix of green, sharp citrus, and rot.

The ambiance is more similar to what lore would dictate of a witch's hut in the woods than a shop just a block off main street, but perhaps there are spells in place to keep humans out.

Or maybe the proprietress doesn't mind regular people getting a taste of magic. After all, no one would believe the potions for sale actually work.

Many who are in the know about magic wouldn't suspect that this potion master is the most ingenious I've ever known. She wouldn't want the word to get out. Zena McFee cares little for having accolades or being in demand—that would leave less time for her research.

"We aren't open today." The woman's voice that calls from the back lacks any hospitality that someone who runs a store should have. She's much too prickly for that.

"It's me," I call back, locking the shop door for privacy.

Zena leans into sight from the backroom, her frown clearing when she sees me. "Oh, I didn't expect you so soon."

"You said you could have it ready." I'd made my way here as soon as I could, leaving Stella to her workshop with Connors. Her mood had been

dark and snappy after the meeting with her mother. She refuses to talk about it.

I don't know how to fix the family issue she's having, but I can put my skill of finding solutions to work in the meantime. I'd messaged Stoneheart a warning about Stella's state and a hint about my errand.

"It's ready." Zena waves me to the back. "I just didn't anticipate your urgency. If you were anyone else, I wouldn't hand something over like this so easily."

"Not even for how much you're charging?" I try and tease, entering the back of the shop. The clutter here is immense. It would be one thing if it were only supplies, but I see at least three different experiments going under glass. The piece of crusty bread dipped in green is the least offensive, and what looks to be teeth floating in amber the most.

Zena only brings experiments to the shop that need constant attention. The cottage she has in the woods is packed with her full collection. I'd only been there once on an errand for Kalos and have no wish to repeat the experience.

"This potion is a powerful working and rare. Something like this could do some real damage in the wrong hands," she says, unlocking a small pull drawer in the wall.

Of course it's rare. The ingredients in the original potion are nearly impossible to get and heinous in nature, but Zena's focus is on finding working substitutions for things that shouldn't be available on the black market. Her disgust for the *lazy solutions* as she calls them is what made Kalos start working with her in the first place.

Her expression is serious when I near. The crow's feet from sun exposure crinkle in concentration as she writes a clear label on the small blue bottle in her grip.

Fertility Aid: Use with caution.

"What's the caution mean?" I ask, frowning.

"It means there could be side effects."

"You didn't say anything about side effects."

"All potions have side effects." Zena glares at me like I'm an idiot. "The most common reaction is for the female to feel like they're going into heat. Other side effects have been limited to a few days at most and are more run-of-the-mill, like a runny nose."

I swallow, not liking that this isn't nearly as risk free as I thought. "But it will work?"

She blinks. Again, doubting my intelligence. "Of course."

"And the supplies are...ethically sourced?"

Zena looks like she's going to smack me. "Benjamin Barnes, are you really asking me that?"

There's a moment of chagrin at that since I'll never know if Benjamin is my full name or not and Barnes was a surname another street kid gave me, but she's right to be frustrated. I've never doubted her.

But I've never needed something for someone who's been so important to me before.

"I have to be sure," I say.

"Yes. That's why it costs so much. If you want details, I can give details."

I swallow, not wanting to know such things because potions never have palatable ingredients, but nod. "I...care about the recipient."

I love her. I keep those last words to myself, but some of the emotion must leak through because Zena loses some of her prickliness.

"It will work. If conception can happen, it will happen. My substitutions have been tested thoroughly. Mushrooms have been the most helpful substrate for recipes like this one." Zena snorts before continuing. "I very much doubt that the lady of the territory wants to ingest pixie flesh, and the lion's mane alternative suffused in blood works far better."

This time when my stomach turns, it's not from hearing about mushrooms. "I don't know what you're implying."

Zena eyes me. "It's no secret that the two of you are close, and then you call me up asking for a fertility potion? The only other you'd be working for is Kalos, and the gods know the dragon doesn't seem to need help in that area."

This was the risk of contracting with someone who lives in Leonid territory, but it's unavoidable. Stoneheart and Stella need to conceive outside of her natural fertility cycle, and Zena is the only potion maker I trust with this.

"This can't get out," I say.

"Don't insult me." Zena waves her hand. "I'm discreet." She stills and the hairs on the back of my neck rise when her sharp green eyes focus on

me in consideration. “But there are rumors, and they aren’t hard to hear.”

“What rumors?” I ask, but I can guess, and the lightness in my chest from the last couple of days dims.

“Loud whispers that the lady of the territory is closer to her bodyguard than her husband. Most aren’t saying it in a malicious way. They understand it was an arranged mating...”

“And others?” I ask.

“They’re looking to start trouble. I’ll say a blessing for the three of you that the potion will take. I don’t want to return to the dark days, and Frank taking over would result in that.”

The three of us. As if it’s as simple as that. I drag my hand down my face.

“My thanks,” I say.

Zena may reach out as if in comfort, but the shop is a blur as I make my way out.

Every moment, every touch since the beginning, I knew this had an end date, but it doesn’t make the last grains of sand in the hourglass easier.

The ache in my chest is distracting even as I try to ignore it and sightlessly take in the other people on the street. A couple of women who were laughing together stare at me now. Their gazes knowing.

I duck my head and find the nearest alleyway to teleport away. When I get there, I fall against the brick wall, gasping. The pain is like nothing I’d ever crave, but this is the end.

I don’t want to leave them, but my presence is hurting Stella and Stoneheart, and I will not allow that.

I’ll grant myself one last night with them. That thought allows me to take a breath past the tightness in my body.

One night to enjoy them and to be instrumental in solving their problem.

One night to say goodbye.

REMY

I LIFT my chin at Connors when I enter Stella's workshop, and he leaves to stand guard on the outside of the closed door.

Stella doesn't register any of it and mutters angrily at the metal she's hunched over.

"Wife," I greet, but other than a single glance up, she doesn't say anything. "How did the conversation with your mother go?"

Her shoulders come down, but she keeps her gaze on what's she working on. The metal piece would fit in the palm of her hand and has intricate designs around the centerpiece.

"I don't want to talk about it," she says.

I nod, unsurprised. Ben had told me as much. "I think you should."

The look she casts me is caustic. "Excuse me if I don't want to talk about my feelings with you."

Her eyes drop back to her work as if ashamed for lashing out, but I'm unbothered. She's right. I'm hardly the one to talk to about emotions, but I can't ignore what is troubling her.

My lips twitch, and I bring my hands to rest on the table on either side of her, my breath brushing her fiery hair as she stills.

"There is only room for one stubborn stoic in this relationship," I say.

Stella chuffs a laugh, before falling silent. After a moment, she places the charm she's working on away from her and leans back into me.

"She doesn't believe I can do this." Her voice is soft.

"Do what?"

She shrugs. “*This*. Manage the politics, gain acceptance from the shifters. She doesn’t think I can be the leader they need.”

And that hurts the woman in front of me more than she cares to admit. I frown. “She said that specifically?”

“Not all of it, but if my own mother doesn’t think I can succeed—”

“Stop,” I growl without meaning to, but she halts with a sniff.

I turn her on the stool to face me. Her brows are furrowed with the insecurities she shrugged off early in this marriage.

I tilt her chin up so our eyes meet. “Her doubts have nothing to do with your abilities. Elena Elderflower entered into an arranged marriage with a dangerous territory leader. The similarities are too much for her to handle, but you are not her.”

Stella swallows, and I lean forward, brushing a kiss to her lips before continuing, “She’s afraid, and that fear makes it impossible for her to see the leader you are.”

Her arms come to wrap around my waist, taking the hug I’m not offering.

“Thank you,” she says. Time will tell if my words make a bigger impact than her mother’s worries. Stella clears her throat, looking away. “I didn’t get pregnant.”

Moving from one insecurity to another.

“No, you didn’t,” I say, because I would scent the change in her if she were. “Ben said he had an idea to help with that before he left, but he’s been mysterious about it.”

She bites her lip, and I want to swoop in and steal another taste for myself.

“What if that doesn’t work?” she asks.

“Then we continue with the charms and hope for the best.”

“You are not a hope-for-the-best type of creature,” she says, placing her hand on my chest. The warmth of it eases a tightness I’d been unaware that was building. I want my wife to be happy. Seeing her in this state is distressing.

“Our situation isn’t dire. The people here recognize the good in you,” I assure her.

She sighs with a nod, but now that we’re facing each other, I can see her weariness. It’s in her eyes and the slight tremble of her hand that runs

over my chest. A different concern takes the forefront in my mind. “You’re pushing too hard.”

“I think I could make four a day if I can keep pace.”

That’s too many. These are challenging charms, and even at the height of her business when I’d spy on her work, she’d do at most one a day.

“Exhausting yourself will serve no one,” I say.

“It will serve the families who will be safer, and every family helped is a point of goodwill for when the vote occurs.” She frowns. “It was a Council member who told my mom about the marriage and caused her to come home early. They probably wanted her to be loud about it, but she’s too familiar with politics to have played into that.”

“That tracks with some other things we’ve dealt with.” I don’t expand on that because it helps nothing to worry her about such details, like the people gossiping about Stella’s attachment to Ben.

The ones we’ve apprehended who are spreading that and the more malicious accusation that I’m the one behind the disappearances have been individuals who worked for Lorenzo in the past and are following Frank’s orders.

There aren’t many, but their voices carry.

I’m stern with what I say next. “None of that changes the fact that you are an asset and can’t work yourself into a depleted state. You must be ready to act if the worst happens.”

If something happens to me, she is the last defense this territory has against people like her uncle. She will be responsible for their safety.

I cup her cheek in my palm and stroke her chin in reassurance, melting some of her tension.

She sighs. “I could use a nap.”

It’s harder than it should be to make myself pull from the circle of her arms, but I do. “I wish you a good rest then.”

A hurt expression passes over her face as she interprets the distance I’m putting between us. It’s too easy to want to be the person who can support her heart and ensure her happiness, but the distance is safer.

Her next smile is wry, and I know this witch has the power to destroy me even with how hands-off I behave.

“Sometimes I think this would all be easier if I hated you,” she says softly.

“I’ve tried my hardest.” Every moment I pulled away to hurt her didn’t leave me unscathed.

Her lips turn up like she’s keeping a sweet but sad secret. “It wasn’t hard enough.”

My swallow is tight at the truth on her face.

She loves me. The words remain unspoken, but it doesn’t stop them from stabbing me. A warmth in my chest fights with regret that loving one-sided will cause her pain.

I distract myself from the marvel of it by clearing my throat and purring. “Maybe you have a masochistic streak yourself.”

She huffs a laugh. “That’s surely true.” But she doesn’t let the joke drop, instead her eyes grow serious, and I want to stop her from saying whatever she’s going to, but I cause her enough trouble without being someone who attempts to silence her. “This is mine to keep. And I’m not running from it. Not with Ben either. Even when he leaves—”

“I’ll tether him to the bed before I let him leave you.”

She arches a brow, and we both know that no matter my influence, whether he chooses to stay is ultimately not in my power.

I’m hoping there’s something else that keeps him here, but only time will tell if that scheme pans out. As we all have more moments together, the casual hope for that solution has turned into something bigger that I didn’t expect.

I don’t want him to leave.

And it frustrates me that I’ve become as drawn to him as I am to my wife. Each detail their souls display makes me want to dig deeper and take what I cannot give in return.

“Be that as it may,” she says, “I’m not going to hide my feelings or try not to feel them.”

Then she’s a braver soul than I.

STELLA

I SIGH at the feeling of fingers in my hair and blink up at Ben.

“Hi,” I say, hiding my face for a moment in my favorite pillow, embarrassed with how I cut him out earlier. I fell asleep on top of the covers of our very desecrated bed. I’d usually have napped in my workshop, but with Stoneheart’s gift of the decor and all the time we’ve spent together here, it soothes my raw heart.

“Hey.” His smile is soft. “Did you have a good nap?”

“It was okay,” I say. It would have been better cuddled with either of the men I’m intimate with, but that would be too much of a luxury. “What time is it?”

“It’s almost dinner time, but I planned something. Stoneheart is meeting us there.”

I tilt my head in curiosity. We’re going out together as the three of us? Before I can interrogate Ben, he moves on.

“I wanted to offer you something.” He hands me a blue vial with a yellowed label.

“What’s this?” I ask, even though I can read the words *Fertility Aid* just fine. Fully awake now, I sit up.

“It’s a potion. It’ll help you get pregnant outside of your natural cycle.”

“Really?” The worry and unnamed disappointment that had been keeping my stomach heavy lifts. A giddy rush has me smiling.

“You don’t have to take it,” Ben says, unaware of my reaction. “There are side effects, but the biggest one the potion master mentioned was that you may feel different...like you’re going into heat.”

My laugh is full of relief. “I think I can stand being horrendously horny to accomplish the goal.”

I’m going to get pregnant. We won’t have to wait months to try again. When I committed to trying to make an heir, I’d been shaky on the decision.

But with the days we all spent together and the promise of making something together and the reality that it might not be in the cards at all... I want this.

And now I have help to make it happen.

Ben tucks a strand of my hair behind my ear. His expression is soft, and I want to wrap myself in it to keep it close.

“Thank you. If this works, you’ve saved us,” I say.

He blushes. “Of course. I told you. My job is to find solutions.”

“I’m sure you won’t mind handling me while I’m horrendously horny either,” I tease.

He waggles his eyebrows. “I couldn’t leave you in your greatest hour of need.”

Something passes over his face for a moment that I can’t track. Am I seeing things? The moment and the doubt stall our joke, and I clear my throat.

“You said we’re going somewhere?” I ask a little confused. Where would we be able to go and use the potion on the same night? Because I’m itching to put this to use. The sooner I’m pregnant, the sooner the territory becomes more stable.

His grin blinds me and is assurance that I imagined the blip before. “It’s a surprise.”



“FUCK ME,” Ben says, his eyes traveling down my dress. I’ve departed from the classic cut ones I’ve been wearing for something a little more

risqué. The black dress clings tight to my curves with a tease of lace accentuating my cleavage.

“Is this okay?” I ask, my hand smoothing down the fabric. “It’s not too much for where we’re going?”

“More than okay. You look like the best dessert.”

“Well, you need to feed me dinner first.”

“Oh, don’t you worry. I’m not getting distracted. It wouldn’t do for Stoneheart to get there before us.” He offers his hand and pulls me into his arms, waiting for me to close my eyes.

I do and take comfort in the feel of him as the world changes around us.

The air takes on an echoey humidity. When I open my eyes, we’re in a room that looks like a lobby of sorts with white mosaic patterned up the walls and ceiling.

A man strolls forward from the massive front desk.

“Oh good, you’re here. We really need to reopen the lobby. If you make this a habit, maybe we’ll change the wards so you can teleport into a broom closet or something,” a man with auburn hair and a slight frame says, his tone teasing.

“Good to see you too, Lowell,” Ben says.

“Are we at a bathhouse?” I whisper halfway in squeal to him. “Is it by chance a sexy bathhouse?”

I’d been terribly jealous at Katarina detailing the date she and Kalos had here, but with everything going on, had completely forgotten.

Ben laughs at my hardly contained glee. “Don’t get too excited. We’re staying in a private room.”

I wave my hand. I feel like I get plenty of group sex with the two men I currently have. The joy of this place is in the luxury and ambiance of it as much as the novelty.

“The lady has good tastes to get excited. Welcome to the Love Bathhouse,” Lowell says with a courtly bow.

Ben flashes a frown at Lowell and pulls me closer. “If you could show us to our room, I’d appreciate it. The rest of our party hasn’t arrived yet, has he?”

Lowell shakes his head, smiling at the show of jealousy from the demon beside me. “I’ve seen no scary gargoyles yet. I gave him directions

to come in the back way, and the door is keyed to him so the three of you will have your privacy.”

He directs us to follow him down a hallway, and I do, barely catching the sound of a cut off moan from the public bathing area.

“Thank you,” I say. “I’m really excited to be here.”

Lowell beams at me as we get to the last door down the hall, opening it. “And we’re very happy to host you. Please do enjoy your night.”

I enter the room and gape. Lowell must leave because somehow, we’re alone with the door securely closed. The mosaic on the walls and floors has all my attention. Deep blues flow in an organic swirling design shot through with silver.

The walls look like the most intricate jewelry with the altar holding thick pillar candles to the side of the door serving as the centerpiece. That’s where the spell that gives our consent for the magic cultivated here by sex to be stored is activated.

One side of the room has a steaming pool of water set into the floor, and the other is piled with cushions and pillows. There’s even a low table with silverware.

“Stoneheart is bringing dinner,” Ben says. He takes the blue vial he stored in his pocket and sets it on the table. “You should really eat dinner before drinking that.”

My lips twitch. “You sent a territory leader on a dinner errand?”

Ben snorts. “He demanded it. I think it’s a part of his kind’s courtship rituals.”

His cheeks are flushed when I turn toward him, and I’m glad he realizes that Stoneheart is courting him as much as he’s courting me. The piano in the bedroom made that clear.

“Ben, this is amazing.”

There’s something sad in his expression, but he smiles. “You deserve only the best.”

Before I let myself succumb to the instinct to get shy at that, I grab his hand and pull him to the candles. “We need to light these before you start being too charming.”

“Am I that tempting?” he teases, almost surprised.

Does he really not realize? He gives and gives, and I’m struck with the need to do the same because he’s essential to me, and he should know it.

A flame kindles in my belly as I light one of the long matches and the closest candle. I step in close until our lips brush and hand him the burning match.

“You tempt every part of me,” I say.

His eyelids droop, and I nod for him to light a candle. When he does, I brush our lips together again. “My body.”

My hand takes his, and we hold the burning match together. “My soul.”

The middle candle comes to life, and a static crackles in the air with magic, the sealing of the act. I hold the match up and blow it out before setting it aside and taking his face in my hands. “And my heart.”

Ben looks hypnotized. “Stella—”

I cut him off with a deeper kiss.

“I’ll keep you forever if you let me,” I whisper.

The sound from his throat is raw, and it lights up my senses as surely as the magic candles do.

I take a step back and pull him toward the padded area of the room.

“When Remy gets here, he’ll add his flame to ours,” I say, and Ben follows me, his movements slow and curious, kicking off his shoes when I kick off mine and stepping forward until we’re surrounded by soft places to land. I turn to him. “In the meantime, the spell will take what we offer.”

My fingers run under his suit jacket and push it from his shoulders.

“You’re playing a dangerous game,” he says.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. Whatever would we do in a sex bathhouse while we wait?” I ask, breathless, undoing the buttons of his dress shirt one by one.

“Are you trying to anger your husband?”

My smile is slow and sure. “He’d never deprive me of a taste.”

Ben swallows but helps me remove his shirt. “A taste?”

“A taste,” I confirm, my hands spreading over his bared chest and down the demarcated lines of his abs to the buckle of his belt. I step closer and give an open-mouthed kiss to his throat.

He shudders, and I continue my kisses over his collar bone, to the expanse of his chest, each flick of my tongue going lower. He stops me from kneeling, grasping my shoulders.

“Stella,” he says, hoarse. “You can have your taste another time.”

I tilt my head, trying to figure out why he's suddenly showing me the walls he's built around himself when he's been so open with us the last few days.

The strap of my dress falls, and he strokes the skin of my shoulder, entranced by the sight. "You should really eat dinner beforehand. I don't want you hungry."

"Is food really what you're hungry for?" I ask, pressing my body to his, pouting that he's stopping my fun, but hopeful that he doesn't seem to want to *stop* completely.

"If you give me what I'm hungry for, I fear I'd devour you whole."
And with that promise, he kisses me.

BEN

THE ROOM IS NO DOUBT a wonder, but I haven't been able to focus on anything except the woman in my arms. The woman who rained kisses on me like I'm as special to her as the gargoyle she's married to.

Stella's delight is an aphrodisiac, but her lust is nothing short of fuel on a fire.

Kissing her is better than feeling the sun on my face after the darkness of night. The tumultuous feelings in my chest, the preemptive despair that tries to catch hold whenever I'm distracted, quiet at the stroke of her tongue.

She wanted to taste me, but each moment together is my last chance to enjoy her. I felt a pang of guilt that I stole what may have been her last chance to get her "taste" of me, but tonight I can't be selfless.

Tonight is for me, and my greed demands to take every breath, every detail to lock away in my memory.

It won't make this easier, but I don't care about easy or efficiency anymore. Not when I'm losing them.

I lower us to the mass of pillows, and when my body presses heavy on hers like I can trap this vibrant sensation between us forever, she moans, breaking the kiss.

"Ben—"

"It's just a taste, love." My words are soft, but my actions are full of hunger as I push her dress up and am met with the sight of her bare pink pussy, the lips shiny with arousal.

My mouth waters.

“Did you forget something?” I ask, my restraint leaving me one chiseled chip at a time.

“Why put on what I know you’re going to take off?”

I curse and dive into heaven. Her flavor explodes across my tongue just like the first time Stoneheart allowed me to touch her. A tangy headiness that I’ll always hunger for and goes straight to my cock.

The soft skin of her inner thighs surrounds me as she tries to close her legs at the sudden stimulation. I rub my cheeks against the plush captivity as my tongue plays along every heated fold. I lick and suck away her essence only to be rewarded with more.

Her gasps and moans are secondary to the vitality and warmth against my lips and tongue. She pulls my hair, and the pain shoots down my spine, making me moan as I suck her clit into my mouth.

The cry she makes is high. The orgasm hitting fast, and her pretty pussy drowns me.

But it’s not enough to take this and tease that it’s a taste.

I need everything. My cock is so heavy and painfully hard that my pants are off, and I’m rising above the mess I’ve made of the woman I’d take as my mate if I were able to.

Her face is sweaty and flushed. With each gasp, her breasts fight to escape the dress that is mussed and pushed to her waist. The hair that she’d had up in a graceful style has spiraled away and covers the surrounding pillows like she’s a reclined angel ready to be debauched.

Chaos in a bottle ready to break free.

“Ben—” she starts but breaks off to pant. Her eyes are full of the same need that’s throbbing in my core even though she’d just climaxed.

It’s not enough for her either.

The air changes, and I immediately know the source, glancing to the doorway. Stoneheart silently closes and locks the door behind him. His gaze burns in a dare that I can’t possibly ignore.

This is my last night with them. If I don’t push all his buttons now, I’ll never be able to.

“Ben, we can’t,” she finally says. Her eyes squeezing shut as if seeing my hunger would be too much of a temptation. But that doesn’t stop her back from arching when I grind my cock against her slick center.

Stoneheart narrows his eyes at me, and I can't stop myself.

"Just let me in a little bit," I say, leading the woman who owns my heart down the path of destruction. "A taste. You said he couldn't deprive us a little taste."

She huffs a laugh. "You're just begging for punishment."

Is that what I'm doing? Is that what I want?

Of course it is. Why else would my heart race with adrenaline seeing him lean against the door, watching us as closely as a painter would if his brushes started to move on their own?

All thoughts of Stoneheart cease as I hold Stella's thighs wide and watch the tip of my cock disappear as her body stretches around me, engulfing me. We moan in unison.

"Just a little more," she begs, surely earning herself a punishment, but I'm powerless against sinking deeper. She's so tight and hot that I need to fight for her body to accept me, which it does.

When I pull back, the shine of her wetness on me has my hips tilting more, pressing deeper until I'm all the way inside her.

The sound in my throat is cut off by the slow clapping from Stoneheart. Stella straightens with an alarmed gasp, her body clenching and strangling my cock.

His hum is resonant and dangerous, causing a warning to curl up my back. "While the cat's away, the mice will play."

I start to pull away from Stella as he approaches us. My reluctance fighting my survival instincts.

"Stay," he orders, and I'm powerless but to comply. "You're going to pay for every inch of it so you might as well enjoy the comfort of my wife's hot cunt."

Stella makes a sound that's a mix of heat and apology.

"Shh," he comforts her, running his claws through her hair. "We'll all enjoy this."

She relaxes, reassured that we didn't hurt him with our play, but I stay coiled tight. His gaze is on mine with a knowing quirk to his lips that makes my body scream at me to start running.

But I earned this punishment.

He moves to the side of us, kneeling behind me in a way that does nothing to quiet the warning blasting through my mind.

My breath is shaky, and I roll my hips forward. Stoneheart makes a gratified growl, gripping the back of my neck firmly.

There's the sound of a whip cutting through air, and a stinging lash hits my ass making me thrust in hard, and Stella and I both cry out. Stoneheart takes some action that I miss as heat spreads from that point and rushes up my spine.

What the— The soft stroke of something wet slides down my crack, and I moan as it brushes against my asshole. I clench against it, but it disappears and another smack echoes in the room.

My cry is quieter and hoarse with the knowledge of what's happening. He's flogging me with his tail.

That detail has my balls drawing up, but Stoneheart's other hand comes between my hips and his wife's accepting pussy and squeezes my cock *hard*.

Blinding pain derails the pleasure for a moment rather than adding to it.

Stoneheart releases me. "Remember, songbird. I haven't given you leave to come inside her yet."

The sound that falls from my lips is pathetic and pained as my cock swells again, but Stoneheart inhales with satisfaction. I push back the need to come, wanting to prolong this as long as possible.

That too dexterous tail tip of his slides between my cheeks again, wetter like he's applied more lube. It teases the puckered skin there before sliding inside with ease.

"Fuck," I choke out. The end of his tail is narrow, but it twirls and coils, stretching me.

"Isn't this what you're wanting? To thrust into our firefly while I take you from behind?"

Holy gods, yes. Stoneheart removes his kilt, and the sight of him serves as a late reminder.

No. That's too much.

"I don't think I can take you," I gasp.

"Don't think then. You made your decision. Demons who don't want to be stretched to their limits don't beg for punishment."

There's a click of a bottle opening, and I watch Stoneheart apply lube to his cock in a seductive stroke. I turn away, not wanting to lose courage

and start begging for mercy. I fill my senses with the woman under me.

Stella's pupils are blown wide, and she rocks her hips with me, watching her husband past my shoulder. The bottle of lubricant gets tossed to a pillow in my line of vision, and I fight the urge to shiver.

"I dislike having my rules broken, but I'd be lenient because I understand the temptation it is to be inside my wife," Stoneheart says, closing in.

I curse the gods as the tail coiling in my ass presses much harder on my prostate.

"But do you know why I won't be lenient with you? Because you did it wearing *this*." His claw catches on the bracelet Stella made me at the beginning of all this. "I *hate* not being able to scent you and the mark we leave on you."

The tip of the claw disengages the clasp, and the bracelet falls from my wrist for the first time since Stella gave it to me.

Stoneheart inhales and makes a satisfied sound. "If you're going to fuck my wife, I better be able to scent you on her. You're ours, songbird."

The impact of his words is a meteor to the separation I've held in my mind between me and the two of them.

Stoneheart slides his tail from me in a rush. My inhale is sharp but stutters as his tail lashes my ass and the back of my thighs. Blow upon blow strikes me, and I bury my face in Stella's neck to muffle my mewling cries.

I'm rocking my hips into Stella without meaning to, whether to escape the hits or present myself better for them, I'm unsure.

Eventually when I'm a babbling mess, it stops. His hands run up my welted skin and my face rises enough to kiss Stella to distract me from how every ounce of pain he gives me is dissolving what I know about myself from the inside out.

Stoneheart sighs. "Your masochism serves us both I think. I never thought I wanted to mark a lover like this."

The reminder of how he marked my shoulder with his claws is merciless in this situation. The scars are still there. I check the prized claiming every morning.

His lubed cock drags against my balls and taint, making them throb. A sound of hesitation escapes my throat, but he smacks my raw ass, and I

quiet.

I've never done this before, and Stoneheart's cock is likely to rip me in half, but part of me wants that. I want him to break me a part so I can stop worrying about territory conflicts and losing the people closest to me, or even loving people I'm not supposed to.

"The candles!" Stella reminds, but she's breathless.

The thought of stopping now is as laughable and shocking as stopping a storm.

Stoneheart snarls. "They don't get this. This magic belongs to us."

And the possessiveness of the sentiment hooks deep inside my chest. When he pushes forward and splits me in two, time stands still.

But that doesn't stop the pain. That is a sudden rush of white noise in my ears taking over every sense with blaring abruptness.

Relax.

Impossible.

"Breathe." The voice is Stella's.

I hiss a breath in an attempt to listen to her. She touches my face lightly and attempt to relax for her.

It's difficult with how I'm buried as deep as possible inside her. My entire body is seized for impact, and I can't move against the barrage of Stoneheart penetrating me.

Time clicks forward again, and the reality of the details surface in the ocean of sensation of being conquered.

I almost choke on my laugh. He barely has the head of his cock inside me.

"You're doing so well." Stoneheart rubs the back of my neck in comfort and slowly the muscles unlock.

"That's it," he says and when he presses forward, the shock of the stretch is less. Now there's a deep pressure and the alien sensation of being prodded from the inside out.

The intimacy of it stuns me. His heart is beating against my insides.

But the tidal wave of newness, the feelings, even the pain, isn't enough to stand against the rising of something ready to pull me under.

Pleasure.

My groan is guttural, and Stoneheart sighs in what must be relief before sinking deeper, so deep that his knot butts up against the rim of me.

When he withdraws, I try and follow with my hips, but slow at Stella's body tightening around mine. Stoneheart surges forward and the dual nature of his heavy cock bottoming out and forcing me to do the same inside his wife has my release threatening to break free.

I tense enough to keep from coming, but it sharpens the feeling of Stoneheart's invasion.

The experience is otherworldly and doesn't end. We move in a rhythm dictated by the devil behind me and my reactions to him. He starts by fucking me slow and deep, but with each bottoming out it gets harder and harder to keep from climaxing.

My body must tattle on me because it gets more difficult for Stoneheart to force his way inside. Stella's also nearly to her peak. She gasps and makes sounds with abandon as her husband's actions fuck me into her.

"Mine," Stoneheart moans into my hair.

I should be shaking my head, but my body isn't my own. There's no standing against him if he claims me, and would I even want to?

Stella moves against me, needing friction at the same time as it's all too much and not enough.

Something deep in my chest shines bright under the debris of my doubt and each jarring moment of this shakes the obstacles of this connection away.

"I'm gonna come." I don't recognize it's me saying the words until Stoneheart wraps his hand around my throat.

"Not yet," he says with a threatening growl. "Say it."

"What?" I ask. Nothing is making sense right now. The oncoming wave of release, my shaky will, or the blinding sensation building in my chest.

"You're ours," Stoneheart says.

Some self-preservation has my voice halting. What about this being the last night? What about doing what's best for these two? I can't possibly be selfish enough to give in just to grasp the brightness that connects the three of us.

"Please, Ben," Stella begs.

Our hearts pulse in time, and my soul refuses to give this up. The word falls from my lips in a croak. "Yours."

And the world shatters.

Everything in my body seizes, and Stella cries out as she accepts my claim and my seed.

Stoneheart growls in victory as his cock kicks inside of me, and I'm filled with his heat.

We become one.

STELLA

“I WASN’T SUPPOSED to come inside her,” Ben says. It’s the first thing he’s said since agreeing with Stoneheart that he’s ours in the heat of the moment.

He’s been a little out of it since then.

Stoneheart had cleaned the two of us up and ushered us to the soaking pool, takeout boxes and all. He’s kept close to Ben, gently stroking his wet hair which makes the demon’s eyes close in soft enjoyment, stopping to make him take bites of food.

I watch them with interest as I eat my own beef and broccoli. Every so often Stoneheart’s tail wraps around my ankle under the steamy water as if taking comfort that I’m here and not wanting me to feel left out.

I don’t.

The sex had been mind-blowing for me, and I loved the sensation of Ben filling me entirely too much, but for Ben...he seems changed.

Some resistance that he had been holding on to had utterly dissolved. Whatever wall had existed, Stoneheart had broken it down with methodical cruelty and is building something new in its place with care.

I’ve never seen Ben so at ease.

“She isn’t fertile,” Stoneheart says with a shrug, and there’s an air of relief to him that Ben is speaking again. The gargoyle had been covertly scenting him as if checking for distress.

Ben hasn’t put the scent blocking charm back on yet. I didn’t know it was offending Stoneheart so much, but every time I breathe in Ben’s sweet

scent, I can't be sorry that the gargoyle removed it.

"Ben gave me a potion to make me fertile again. That was the real plan for tonight," I say, my cheeks heat from more than just the hot water.

Stoneheart's brows lift.

"I haven't taken it yet," I clarify. "We were waiting for you. Apparently, I might become ravenous." I snap my chopsticks at him.

His lips twitch. "Which is so different from your usual state, greedily begging for our cocks and pouting when you don't get your way."

"Hey!" I complain playfully and flick water at him, but it doesn't reach far because I'm being careful to keep the takeout container I'm eating out of balanced. I'm sure we're not supposed to eat in the soaking pool, but it would have taken a stronger willed person than me to ignore Stoneheart's demands.

Stoneheart becomes serious even while he's curling Ben's hair around a finger. "That's a valuable potion. Who is the potion master?"

"It's made ethically, and I'm not revealing my source to you." Ben rolls his eyes but pauses. "They are discreet, but there's been talk—"

Stoneheart makes a sound. "Yes, the rumors. I've heard them. I'm not concerned."

Ben frowns.

"What rumors?" I ask.

"That I'm too close to you," Ben says. Each word of this conversation adds a little bit more tension back to his posture.

I blink, thinking back to our interactions today. The sadness lining his eyes before desire took over. "Are you planning on leaving us?"

Ben hesitates, and my heart falls.

Stoneheart scowls. "That's unacceptable. The rumors are merely mosquitos buzzing. The territory would accept you with us given time." He grips Ben's hair, and the demon sighs at the tension. "If you must keep your secrets, don the bracelet again. The water here removes scents."

Huh, well that's helpful since Ben came inside me without the charm on.

Ben doesn't say anything until Stoneheart releases his hair.

"I planned for this to be the last time."

"So you'll leave us after tonight over whispers?" Stoneheart sneers.

“It would be the best thing for the two of you, but...” He looks lost as he trails off, his hand rubbing his chest. “I don’t know if I can.”

My shoulders drop in relief.

“Don’t make decisions for us,” Stoneheart says, but the anger coiling in him eases. “Neither of us mind taking the more challenging path.”

“You’ll consider staying then?” I ask, not specifying for how long. The idea of him leaving hollows out my chest. With everything happening how it is, I can only focus on one thing at a time.

Ben frowns, but his eyes are conflicted.

I place the empty food container on the side of the pool and glide my way through the water to the two of them. I sit on his lap and wrap my arms around his neck, water drips everywhere but the contact has him relaxing.

“Please,” I say, brushing my lips over his in a soft kiss.

There’s a moment of silence, and my heart beats hard against my ribs until Ben narrows his eyes, deciding something. He turns to Stoneheart. “I won’t leave based on the rumors in exchange for you to stop holding back.”

Stoneheart’s brow arches. “I rather think you appreciated me holding back tonight.”

Ben’s cheeks pinken. “I mean, you’ll be with us fully. Stella deserves more than what you’ve given her. If I’m going to consider staying, it won’t be for you to be halfway in the relationship.”

I pull my arms away from his neck, but Ben’s hand grips my waist, keeping me on his lap. Is he demanding that Stoneheart give me his love?

“You won’t leave her needy,” Ben says.

His knot. Ben is bartering for Stoneheart to knot me. Really daring him to. I clench on nothing at the idea of finally giving my body what it craves.

Stoneheart’s eyes narrow at the two of us like I’m to blame for this turn of events. “And is that your final decree?”

The hope falters. He won’t do it. He said that it will get emotions involved, and he won’t risk that. I already love him, but that’s not something he’s going to give me.

Ben nods, and now I’m losing them both in a way.

Stoneheart leans over, ignoring Ben and lifts my chin. “Is that what you want?”

My lip lower lip trembles at the truth of how much I want it, but wanting something doesn't make it so. Especially with someone like Remy Stoneheart, who keeps his emotions in check by force.

"I want what you're willing to give," I say. And I really want him willing to become more emotionally involved with me. I want him to claim me in the way instincts have demanded between us.

He straightens, and I blink to preemptively hide any silly tears.

"It's a deal then," Stoneheart says.

Now I'm blinking in surprise. "What?"

"Ben gave his price for staying—" Stoneheart starts, and Ben's lips purse because that wasn't his exact verbiage. "And I agreed."

His pale gaze is as exacting and precise as an autopsy. I'm already naked but something tells me that he can see just how badly I desire this to end in something other than heartbreak.

One thing at a time. Ben has agreed to stay for now.

"Now finish your dinner," Stoneheart says. "You'll both need your strength."



IF I never have to drink a potion again, it will be too soon. The initial taste wasn't bad, and there's a warming effect that follows the path it slides down my throat until it rests in my stomach, but the accompanying waves of aftertaste have me flinching.

Ben sits near me with a glass of water that I sip, trying to make the flavor disappear. He refills it when I finish, and I make a face.

"It just keeps coming back," I complain. "One atrocious flavor will fade only for something else to take its place."

I thought the first was bad, like musty dirt coating my tongue, but that was before the later tastes that make me think of different types of slime rose to the forefront.

Ben's brows crease in sympathy. "I'm so sorry. I didn't consider that possibility."

Stoneheart rises from the position he'd taken relaxing against the pillows across from us after he'd lit his candle with an air of chagrin at his

earlier possessiveness.

“I have something that could help.” He goes to the same grocery bags that he brought dinner in and pulls out a small box.

He hands it to me, and I read the pretty label. “Chocolates?”

“I thought you may get a sweet tooth later. It will either make it worse or better.” He shrugs.

It’s another courting gift, and I blush at the thoughtfulness of it.

“Thank you.” I gag as another aftertaste scatters over my tongue, this one tasting green, but the kind of green that makes one think of swamps, not spinach. “I’ll take my chances of making it worse.”

I open the artisan chocolate box and pop one in my mouth at random.

The flavor of the chocolate is light and smooth. It coats my tongue with hints of floral and sweet that seems familiar, but I don’t know why.

“Better?” Stoneheart asks.

I tilt my head, waiting for the potion to strike again, but it doesn’t, and I nod in relief. “Much better.”

We share the small box of goodies, and it’s only after it’s gone that I realize the flavors almost taste like a combination of Ben’s and my scent. The knowledge makes a fuzzy warmth grow in my chest, and I lay back, basking in the feeling as it starts spreading through my belly.

“How long do you think it will take to kick in?” I ask.

Ben winces. “I don’t know. I should have asked more questions.”

Stoneheart’s tail strokes along my calf playfully, and Ben seems to be unable to keep his hands to himself, lightly touching my shoulders. His scent is gone again. He’d ignored Stoneheart’s glower earlier and put the bracelet back on.

The fact that we’re all still naked starts to become a larger detail as my eyes trace up Stoneheart’s body. I lick my lips as I imagine licking the swirls of ink of his tattoo and the warmth shifts to a fire in my lower belly.

I hum. “I think I’m starting to feel it.”

Ben starts to nibble on my neck. “Your temperature does seem to be a little raised.”

Stoneheart watches us, his gaze heavy like he’s touching me. The fact he’s more than an arm span away feels like a taunt.

I let my legs fall open a little and am gratified when his nostrils flare. Ben runs a hand up my inner thigh and strokes up through my folds.

I moan, surprised by how wet I already am.

“So fucking pretty,” Ben says. “Wish I could come inside you again.”

The sound that escapes my throat is needy.

“But we both know what you really need,” Ben says. We’ve been intimate before, but this is somehow different. There’s a sensation in my heart, a wholeness. It’s almost as if I feel his affection for me inside myself, and it amplifies my own feelings.

It must be the potion.

I rock my hips as my body cramps with need. “Fuck. Inside me, Ben.”

Ben glances to Stoneheart first as if in permission, and with the gargoyle’s nod, he slides two fingers inside me. The pressure releases a cascade of pleasure. A craving crashes through me, and I tighten around his fingers.

“Fuck, she’s so tight I wonder if she’ll bruise your knot,” Ben says almost as a joke.

Stoneheart shifts, and the sight of his cock already hard has the desire ramping up to almost painful levels.

I make a sound of distress. “I need—”

“I know,” Ben cuts me off and curves his fingers, rubbing my g-spot while his thumb presses against my clit.

The release is quick, and I arch my back in surprise. I shiver at the rolling waves of pleasure that take the edge off the clawing pain.

I bite my lip at the wet sounds as Ben continues to touch me.

“So sensitive when she’s like this.” Stoneheart’s words are dark with an avarice that is thrumming in my blood. “And making it so slick like a good wife, practically gushing.”

I sigh, but the relief doesn’t last, and I’m tightening on Ben’s fingers again.

“More,” I implore, shaky but too aware of the pulse of need between my legs.

Ben hesitates, and the pause causes the next cramp tightening my body to hurt. I gasp and twist, trying to rock myself to deepen the penetration.

I hear movement and realize I’ve closed my eyes as the wave of heat running through my body starts to take on a painful edge again.

“Please, please,” I beg.

Ben moves away from me, removing his fingers.

“No!” I cry, but a large palm presses against my chest to keep me stationary and push me flatter against the pillows as a sob builds. There’s a blurry dark shape above me now.

“You should give her mouth something to do while I take my time. She’s never taken a knot, and I don’t want to hurt her.” Stoneheart is the ominous shape over me, his wings high and his hand over my heart. I swear I feel how pleased he is by my needy squirming. His other hand lifts one leg to more fully bear my needy center.

“I’m so empty,” I say.

“Not for long,” he promises and presses his cock against me. I’m so slick from the potion and probably from Ben’s seed earlier, but it still takes a moment for my body to accept him.

The fervent sound I make when I give way around him resonates in my chest. The bite of stretch is a welcome friend at this point.

“You smell delicious, firefly,” Stoneheart says. “Maybe we should keep you in this state. Hot and bothered for us, begging for relief.”

I shouldn’t be thrilled at his words. Being like this forever would be painful. But it’s the *desire* that hooks me. The thought of them wanting to do this with me forever.

Ben’s fingers slide through my hair, his hard length bare next to my cheek, and I open my mouth to accept him. He moans, and the pleasure ricochets through me. The hot velvet skin of his cock against my lips is a delight while being used by the two of them.

Stoneheart’s movements are slow and rolling as he sinks deeper inside me. I feel him bottoming out, the limit of my body stretching around him, and I haven’t even felt the press of his knot yet.

Worry creases my brows, and I let Ben’s cock fall from my mouth. *It will fit, right?* I could have sworn Stoneheart had ground his knot against me before.

“Just need to work your body up to taking all of me,” Stoneheart says as if he can read my mind instead of only the expressions on my face.

On the next thrust, his cock sinks deeper inside me, proving he’s right. The dull throb of pressure heralds of greater things to come.

“So very accepting,” Stoneheart says as his thumb starts to stroke slow circles. My body shudders and gives him more. I’ll give my mate everything he asks of me.

When his knot barely touches the delicate folds of my pussy, I moan in victory.

Ben presses his cock to my lips again as if he can't stop himself or to distract me from what's coming.

Stoneheart groans as the hard swell of his cock grinds against my pussy. The all-encompassing pressure against my entrance and clit has me moaning deeply around Ben's cock.

"Fuck, Stella," Ben says, his head tilting back. "I'm not going to last if you keep doing that."

Stoneheart eases away before pressing forward again, the beginning width of his knot starts to burn, but each careful rock of Stoneheart's hips keeps the sensation manageable as he makes my body softer for him to take.

"That's it, look at how beautifully you take me," Stoneheart growls

Ben pulls his cock from my mouth to let me do just as Stoneheart orders. The sight of his knot, angry and flushed, disappearing into my body has me tensing without meaning to.

The sting of the stretch grows, and I whimper.

"Easy, firefly. Almost there," Stoneheart coaxes. His body is tight, the hand he has against my chest flexes like I'm testing his iron control.

Ben returns to my mouth, pressing past my gag reflex. I take him, needing something else to focus on other than the sharpening pain even as I try to relax. My tongue strokes the underside of him in hard flicks.

Ben curses and groans. His cock pulses, and his release flows over my tongue. He falls away, stealing his hardness from me. Stoneheart wraps his hand around my throat and kisses me deeply. His tongue savoring the flavor of Ben, the mix of us.

I moan into his mouth and cant my hips up, pressing him deeper.

Stoneheart breaks the kiss and growls deep and uncontrolled. My body responds, becoming even more pliant in my need, and his knot slips the rest of the way in on a rush.

I can't breathe.

The stretch is *enormous*.

And I can't breathe because I'm too busy coming. A full, painful ecstasy races through me like liquid fire.

Stoneheart's snarl breaks off on a deep groan. His seed splashes hot against my insides, and I inhale in shock as the pressure of it grows. I'm so filled by him, there's hardly any room for his cum. The heavy feeling grows but no seed makes it past where his knot is locked just under my pubic bone.

Ben kisses my forehead. "Breathe, love. Big, slow breaths. You've taken all of him. You can do this."

I suck in air, and the chill of it against my lungs starts to douse the runaway wildfire residing deep inside me.

The last pulses of release shiver through me, and I finally can start working at getting more oxygen.

Stoneheart carefully turns us to lie on our sides, still locked together

Ben's heated body presses against my clammy one from behind, curling around me. His hand falls to my lower belly. "Let his seed do its work."

My body must react to that somehow because Stoneheart shudders and knocks Ben's hand away. "Don't cause trouble. I doubt she wants to be locked together for hours."

I snort. Definitely not. I feel like a stretched-out rag right now. We all take deep breaths like we've run a marathon.

"Is it always like that?" I ask, still panting.

Stoneheart huffs a surprised laugh. "I wouldn't know. I've never knotted anyone."

I'm surprised into silence at that confession. Stoneheart's knot throbs inside me almost in time to both of our hearts.

Ben exhales against my shoulder, his body relaxing against mine like he's fallen asleep.

I should do the same. Stoneheart's eyes are closed too. There's no telling if the potion is going to cause another flare of heat before the night is over, but I hesitate to close my eyes.

I don't want this moment to end.

I trace my finger over the curve of Stoneheart's lips, and he sighs at the touch. The ache in my chest becomes too great, and I mouth my confession against his throat, unable to keep it inside any longer but unwilling to say something unwelcome. *I love you.*

His throat bobs against my lips.

He's heard me. He knows.

It won't matter, but at least it isn't trapped inside me anymore.

BEN

IT'S morning when I wake in the mass of pillows of the bathhouse, Stella in my arms. The air is warm and humid enough that we aren't cold, but I'm pretty sure a certain gargoyle had a wing draped over us for the majority of the night. I sit up, frowning at his absence, but ease when I catch sight of him.

Stoneheart sits, dressed and standing guard.

"We need to get back. I'm expected for a meeting with Silas soon," he says.

I nod still half asleep.

Stoneheart hesitates for a moment. "We should let her sleep. Take her to our bed first and come back for me."

Now I'm fully awake. "You'll let me teleport you?"

Stoneheart only arches a brow as if him trusting that I won't take him somewhere terrible instead of to the Firefly isn't a monumental thing.

I don't have to say goodbye to them yet. My throat swells, but I try to ignore it. I dress before picking up a sleeping Stella and her enchanting dress. She's still nude, but the trip to tuck her into our bed at the penthouse is quick.

I almost don't castigate myself for starting to think of the bed as belonging to me too.

Stoneheart has cleaned up the room when I return.

I shiver at the lack of her presence. I rub my chest and frown at the odd overdrawn sensation there.

“Are you okay?” Stoneheart asks. “I can make my way back myself if you need.”

I shake my head. I’m not losing a chance to claim this small part of him.

“I’m fine. Just trying to decide how Antarctica is this time of year,” I tease.

Stoneheart snorts but looks a little uneasy.

“I’m joking.” I hold out my hand. “I’ll leave that adventure for another time.”

Stoneheart’s grin is wry. “You like me around too much for that.”

He takes my hand, and I swallow, realizing how right he is.

“I’ve got to keep you on your toes.”

I pull him into the in-between, and the shadows run over our skin as I travel to the library of the penthouse.

He looks around alarmed. “You definitely do that. What is this place?”

My heart stops.

“You can see it?”

The shadows dissipate, and the empty library takes shape around us, but the details of the room don’t matter.

“Yes.” Stoneheart frowns. “Am I not supposed to?”

“Usually, the trip is instant for the people I teleport.” Surprised confusion makes my mind spin. What does this mean?

Only those who can travel between planes can see the in-between.

Or those they’re bonded to.

Shock halts that thought, and I stare at Stoneheart. *Impossible.*

But is it?

I rub my chest and surely as if waiting for me to take notice of them, the bonds are there. Probably growing slowly with each minute I spent with them until this gargoyle had stripped me of my reservations last night.

That memory of euphoria and bright connection.

I didn’t see the signs, didn’t look for them because I’ve never experienced something like this before.

I’ve soul bonded to two people by accident.

But that’s too messy for a master tactician.

A deeper truth clicks into place. The whole time I knew Stoneheart would have some devious plan to keep me here. Offer me something he thought I couldn't refuse or something like that.

I'd been surprised that he hadn't unveiled it when I mentioned leaving last night. It made me wonder if I'd been too suspicious about him. Maybe it was as simple as using my feelings for Stella as leverage.

But that hadn't been his plan.

"You caused this on purpose," I whisper.

Something in my voice must shift Stoneheart from his curiosity and the warm way lovers speak to the powerful territory leader who stands before me. I never should have forgotten who he was.

"What do you mean?" he asks.

"How did you expect to convince me stay?" I ask. "Tell me the truth."

I want to hear it from his own lips.

"Why?" he asks, but my lips purse. He owes me answers. Finally, his eyes narrow, as if gleaning things I'm not ready to tell him.

"Stoneheart," I prompt.

"You love her."

I say nothing to that. The idea that he'd only been relying on my feelings for Stella sounds so naïve now. When had I stopped being suspicious? When he kissed me? Called me songbird?

He straightens, realizing that I'm not leaving until I dig into this. "But that wouldn't have made you stay. You're very good at depriving yourself if you think it's for the best."

I want to deny that, but it's true.

"Unless you grew...attached," he says. The confession is unabashed.

"You expected me to bond with her."

Stoneheart tilts his head. "It was one possibility in a sea of them. Demons are known to be masters of soul magic. The bonds they form are as organic as breathing. They are some of the few who can even break bonds without it being too damaging."

He's not saying anything I haven't heard before, but I didn't *know* what something like that would feel like.

"You relied on my ignorance," I say. And that stings. Does he even care about me, or am just another asset he's securing like a politically advantageous wife?

“I expected you to anticipate that part of your nature. That you didn’t...worked well for me.” There’s a flash of regret and some relief before cruel satisfaction takes over. “Because you’d never break a bond, would you, Ben? Not now that you have one with her.”

I don’t deny the presence of a bond. I can’t fathom its existence let alone decide if I have the constitution break it with how I feel about them.

“You’ve miscalculated, Remy,” I say.

Because Stoneheart would never assume that I’d bond to both of them. And now I must figure out a way to undo it.

I can’t be bonded to other territory leaders and serve Kalos. Recognized bonds are legal things. The Council would require I forfeit my allegiance to Kalos to keep his influence from spreading too far.

Exactly the conflict I expected, but one that hurts more than I ever imagined. Because this delicate thing shining in my chest? It’s beautiful. The warmth of it fills every lonely cavern in my soul.

I’ve never experienced anything like it.

“Did you expect me to make leaving easy for you?” Stoneheart’s stare is as intense as a cat finally catching the mouse he’s been playing with. “Will you tell her if you decide to dissolve the bond? Or will you let the connection she feels to you blink away?”

Can one be angry at the Devil when he shows his hand? He’s just doing what I expected from him at the start. It’s my fault I fell under his spell.

The snapping frustration tightening my throat doesn’t care that he’s only doing what’s in his nature.

“*Fuck you,*” I say.

STELLA

I DON'T KNOW exactly what wakes me at first. It's something different.

A disturbance.

I stretch, the sheets wrapped around me carry Stoneheart's scent. I'm in our bedroom. It gives me pause.

The bathhouse wasn't a dream, was it? But as my sleepiness fades, the aches of my body bloom. My smile is full of secret delight as I press a pillow against my face.

Last night had been perfect. I sigh, but the off sensation that woke me is still there, begging for attention.

I take stock of my magic. Is there some upset occurring around me that my instincts are warning me about? But the bedroom is peaceful, my wards humming sweetly against my senses.

I frown and turn my searching inward. It doesn't take long to realized what's different.

I gasp, sitting up so fast that the world spins.

Low in my belly there's something new.

Oh, holy shit. I'm pregnant.

Oh shit. My eyes go wide. Panic like I've never known makes it hard to breathe.

No—this is a good thing! I tell myself. This is exactly what we wanted, and now it's happened. The people in the territory will feel more secure in our place here.

“You are welcome here and planned,” I say to the tiny disturbance, trying to calm myself when the self pep-talk doesn’t cut it.

I’m going to be a mom.

Fuck, fuck, fuck. What have I done? I laugh at the ridiculousness.

It’s what have we done?

“Don’t worry,” I say to it. “I’m going to get my head on straight really soon and stop freaking out. I just need to tap someone else in.”

I need support.

The pain in my heart is sharp when I realize I can’t call Mom about this. Not with how we left everything.

I told her I can do this. I can’t go to her the moment I start flailing.

I need Stoneheart to give me a grounding kiss in triumph, and Ben to whisper that I’m going to be great at this because I only got so far as what an heir would mean for the politics of the situation and the idea of having something of my own.

I did not really consider that we were bringing a whole other person into this.

I take deep breaths and throw on some comfy leggings and a T-shirt instead of the protective shield of a sleek appearance.

The people in this penthouse have started to feel like family, and I’m in a hurry. I don’t need to don armor up here.

The kitchen is empty. What time is it? I shake my head, unwilling to be distracted from my destination.

I’m surprised I haven’t run into Ben yet, but the best place to find Stoneheart if he’s in is the library.

Silas waits in front of the closed library doors, his tail twitching in... worry?

I learned that the sound proofing will stop people from being able to listen to discussions and blocks large noises, but if you lean in close, you can tell when the room is occupied by the soft murmur of speaking.

But when I lean in the voices sound angry.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

“My lady,” Silas jumps back. “Barnes and Stoneheart seem to be in an unscheduled meeting. I’m just waiting until the coast is clear.”

Silas inhales, and his expression does something I’m not familiar with. Can a lizardman pale? He’s doing his best attempt to.

Foreboding sinks in my chest.

"Are they fighting?" I ask, pushing open the door without waiting for his answer, or considering his shock.

"*Fuck you,*" Ben says, and it's full of sad venom.

"What's going on?" I ask the room this time, walking to the two of them.

They glare at each other, and I shrink a little on the inside, but my news can't wait. My heart is already pulled so tight between wonder and worry that I'm going to explode.

"I have something to tell you," I say, hopeful I can derail whatever argument they're having and solve my touch of panic all in one go, but Ben's attention drops to my stomach and the expression on his face is shock.

"Impossible," he whispers. He raises a hand as if feeling or seeing something that I can't.

Well, I guess there goes my announcing the news. Confusion scrunches my brow. Why does he look so pained?

I take a couple of steps forward, wanting to ease his obvious hurt, but Ben stumbles away.

I turn to my husband, alarmed, but he's no help.

Stoneheart's nostrils flare. "Fuck."

"Did you plan this too? Did the both of you set me up?" Ben asks.

"You think I would plan this?" Stoneheart asks, his voice nearly a growl.

I straightened, and my heart falls into quicksand and the sucking sensation makes me want to curl into a ball.

But we did plan this.

"Ben," I say, reaching out, needing the comfort he's always been able to provide.

"No!" he shouts.

I yank my hand back. His voice feels like it slices me to the bone, and it's a wonder to me that the injury isn't physical.

His eyes widen, his overwhelm reaching its zenith. "I can't do this."

And then he's gone in a whisp of shadow. My rejected hand flies to my heart, and I press in on a pained gasp. He didn't actually hurt me, so why does this pain feel real?

“What just happened? This was the plan.” My voice wavers, and I look to Stoneheart for answers. Did we make a terrible mistake? No, we created an heir to stabilize the territory. “We did it.”

“Congratulations, wife.” His tone is as cold as ice, and he looks like he wants to hit something. “But the child isn’t mine.”

It takes a moment for me to absorb the words with how caustic they are. “What?”

“I said, the child you are carrying is not mine.”

My brain stalls out at that because of course the baby is Stoneheart’s. He’s the one that bred me, knotted me even! It takes an embarrassingly long time for the mental math to make sense. Because if it’s not Stoneheart’s...

It’s Ben’s.

My hands cover my mouth in surprise. Fuck.

“But that’s not possible,” I say after the first tidal wave of shock. “We were careful.”

“Not careful enough,” he bites out.

The hair stands up on the back of my neck at the castigation.

“And you’re angry at me for this?” I ask.

Stoneheart’s eyes narrow. “Excuse me if I don’t jump for joy that my wife is carrying another’s child.”

“You were just as involved as anyone else. You gave him permission!” I’m grasping for logic to throw at him, to shield me from this revelation.

“Except for that last time.”

Now I actually want to throw something at him.

“Don’t act like you weren’t slinking in the shadows waiting to be able to punish us,” I say.

There’s a light of surprise in Stoneheart’s expression. As if I can’t tell when this gargoyle enters a room. It just made what happened last night better.

Until now.

He shakes his head and turns away, logic not making any headway. “It was supposed to be mine! You are supposed to be mine.”

Rage shakes his words, but I don’t cower. If anything, the anger distills the moment. The shocked panic that sent me to my lovers in need of reassurance evaporates with my own frustration.

I tighten my fists. Last night I would say I was his, but this morning, he's quickly losing that privilege.

I can't belong to someone who would discard me and everything we have so easily. I'm not that kind of masochist.

"I'm not an object to be owned," I say.

The look he shoots me over his shoulder is scathing.

"We will speak about this later." The growl in his words can't be contained, just like the gargoyle himself. He throws open the balcony doors and, just like that first night not so long ago, leaves.

The numbness in my chest has teeth.

How did I expect this all to go?

I stare out the open balcony doors, lost.

I've lost.

I lost Ben. I lost Stoneheart.

It's just me. Alone.

But I'm not alone either.

"My lady."

I finally look up at Silas. His brow is creased in worry. He's probably been trying to catch my attention for a while.

I wipe my cheeks, and the tears there are burning brands of shame. How can I possibly be so heartbrokenly disappointed and angry at the same time?

"Are you okay?" he hesitates. "Do you need me to contact a healer?"

The only reason to see a healer now would be to make the pregnancy go away. It's a simple thing with it being so early, a magic trick. One moment there's a thing in your life that's set to disrupt everything, and the next it's gone.

But that's not true in this situation.

Even if there was no pregnancy anymore, I can't reach for Stoneheart again. I don't know if I'd trust him with my vulnerabilities.

I needed him. I needed them both. And they left.

So erasing this pregnancy won't bring back the moments my love felt too big for my chest.

It would just be me losing something else.

How many more things do I have to lose for this territory?

Not this.

I may be the only one to care for it right now, but it's mine to care for.
"I'm fine," I say, my voice stronger than my insides.

Silas doesn't offer any arguments about how this makes everything so much more complicated. He only nods.

"Whatever you need," he says.

"I need—" I break off to swallow the bitter rush of disenchantment. "I need to work."



STONEHEART DOESN'T RETURN until late into the evening. That must be the time anyway. The actions of charm making soothed the numbness, but it doesn't quell the anger or frustration.

Fucking men. Fucking Council. Fucking territory and all the people in it.

His presence announces himself. The dark air shivers across my skin, but I ignore it. I am no shirking bride tonight. I'm a coiled snake willing to strike.

I don't respond to him entering the room. Connors leaves to wait outside. A talon taps the plate of dinner that's long since gone cold at the far end of my worktable.

"They say you haven't eaten much," he says.

My stomach turns at the thought of food and the ridiculous observation. Why should he care? "I haven't had much of an appetite."

Pepper probably suspects about the pregnancy. It's not like this is some secret to keep quiet even if Connors had delivered the food rather than let the female shifter close.

I could hide it. I could possibly make a charm that would remove the scent of Ben from me.

The thought of the demon stings, but he's not who lulled me in with whispers of mutual caretaking only to turn away.

Ben always planned to leave. Maybe he'll return, maybe not, but I'm not basing any plans on needing him either way.

Hiding that the baby is his indicates that I'm ashamed of it.

I'm not.

And I find I'm not so quick to want to capitulate to the cries of the mob. If they really think Frank is their best option at the end of everything? Maybe they don't deserve to be saved. It's a disingenuous thought, but it's my current state of mind.

There's an heir. So what if it's not Stoneheart's? It's mine, and I'm the one with a blood right to this territory.

"Stella, about the baby—" Stoneheart starts as if reading my mind.

"I'm keeping it," I say, glaring at him and unable to read the flicker in his eyes. "And I don't want to talk about it with you, not yet."

He nods, so giving and magnanimous in this moment but not when I actually needed him.

"You've been busy," he says, gesturing to the partly completed charms around me. With each physical action of shaping the metals and stone, I plan my next moves. I grieved what we had between the three of us, but I'm moving forward now.

I know when he sees it because he flinches, and his expression becomes even more remote.

The labradorite is the center stone for the newest charms.

That gift had been a symbol to me. One I clung to as surely as the silver thumb ring that I wasn't the only one getting too entangled in this.

When I returned to my workshop with my heart in pieces, I picked up the crystal I'd admired many times, had held onto when his motives were a mystery, and I chiseled it a part.

I deceived myself by thinking I could just love him one-sidedly. Dismantling the stone is the first step in building a different relationship. The professional one we were supposed to have.

"I believe you now," I say, and I can't stop the ache of my words even if tried. "About you not being a place for my heart to rest."

Stoneheart clears his throat, but if I was expecting him to give me some reasoning or cajoling, I'd be left wanting.

"Good," he says, but he looks anything but happy. There's a long pause where I act like I'm getting back to work, though I see nothing of the silver in front of me.

"You should rest." His voice is just as textured with complicated feelings without me seeing him. "I'm patrolling tonight, so you'll have the room to yourself," he says, as if offering an olive branch

The room of moody colors and romantic touches that gave me hope. The bedsheets that smell like us. The memories of Ben at the piano before he vanished.

I'd rather sleep on the chair, but I don't say that. I only nod, turning back to my work. Funny how the intricate magic that was such a struggle to master is the only thing that makes sense right now.

There's a pang in my chest that would make my breath catch if it were any stronger. It feels foreign, like I'm picking up Stoneheart's emotions instead of my own. But with Ben gone, there's nothing between us except the political gains of the other's presence.

"Till we meet again, wife," he says, and the words are soft.

I only nod as if to myself, and he leaves me again.

Maybe there will be a time in the future when his absence doesn't hurt.

BEN

“RINA WOULD’VE SAID that my brooding is the worst in the house, but I do believe you’ve won that award.”

“What?” I shake myself from the circles of thoughts that try to pull me in.

Kalos’s patient expression makes me want to run, but I won’t. This is my place. Here in his office with my tablet, solving problems while he leans back in his desk chair. The leather couch under me would be well worn if Maggie didn’t employ maids who are thorough in their maintenance. Yet it feels different.

Katarina has probably been hanging out here, changing the shape of the couch a small amount so it doesn’t feel as comforting with its sameness as usual.

Better to be here doing what I do best than struggling with the memories of a certain gargoyle and witch I’m bound to. I don’t have solutions for that. Avoidance is all I can manage.

And I’ve successfully dived into my job for two days, but the look in Kalos’s eyes heralds an end to that.

“What are you doing here, Ben?” he asks.

“What do you mean? This is my home.” My throat dries. “This is exactly where I belong.”

Not acting as a useless bodyguard to a different territory leader’s wife, not falling in love with the devil, and not connecting the three of us in a web.

“A certain pregnant witch would disagree,” Kalos says before catching himself and snorting. “The other pregnant witch. My mate also disagrees, but she’s letting me broach the subject with you.”

Katarina had been cold toward me since I’ve returned. I assume that Stella has told her something unfavorable but honest. I’m under no illusion that my leaving and subsequent silence hasn’t hurt her.

She hasn’t tried to contact me, but even if she did, I wouldn’t respond. It’s better this way.

I’m distracted from my practiced mantra by a detail Kalos let slip.

Stella is still pregnant. My inhale is painful.

Kalos makes a considering noise. “I know the child is yours. Stella told me.”

My throat is tight when I respond. “I didn’t know if she was going to keep it.”

It’s a complication with the tensions in the territory and would be in her rights to end it. I’d expected it, prepared myself for it.

Kalos shrugs. “She seems to intend to. She wanted promises of our alliances to her specifically, whether Stoneheart remains in the picture or not.”

She’s securing her base. If she isn’t hiding the parentage of the child, which would be near impossible in a territory of shifters, she’s preparing for the upset it will cause. She won’t allow herself to be run out of her own territory. Her situation does not match her mother’s.

An ill-earned pride blooms, and it’s a struggle to keep it from touching the bond that hums in my chest. I don’t know how much either of them can pick up from the intact thing, but I haven’t decided what to do with it yet.

“So, I’ll repeat myself. What are you doing here, Ben?”

“Did she say anything else?” I can’t help to ask.

Kalos arches a brow. “No. I’m not exactly someone she’d spill her deepest secrets to.”

That’s true. Their relationship has been touchy since the discovery that Stella is the daughter of Lorenzo Leonid, and Kalos had a poor reaction.

“If she begged for you to come back, would you?” Kalos asks.

No. I need to end this bond I have with them and move on. This is where everything makes sense. Stoneheart and Stella have each other, they don’t need me.

I don't answer him verbally, but I don't have to.

Kalos tilts his head. "I know how keenly you ache for family. Are you really going to abandon your own blood in another territory?"

"Family doesn't have to do with blood," I say, and it's true, even if the idea that I will have a child that will exist in this world is more than I can comprehend right now.

Kalos snorts. "That's true. It's the choice of whether we accept the tethers of others. We will see if Stoneheart agrees with you."

I can't keep myself from being curious. "What do you mean?"

"He hasn't yet publicly claimed the child as his successor. I'm sure that the shifters are having a hard time trying to decide if he's been truly cuckolded and should lose standing in their eyes—"

"I doubt anyone would look at Stoneheart and think his dominance of the situation lacking." My cheeks flush.

Kalos shrugs. "It doesn't change the fact that there haven't been any official statements, only whispers. I'll do my best if he does choose to reject and try to oust her—"

"He would never," I interject. Stoneheart loves Stella, whether he accepts it or not.

"He holds a lot of territory. If people start thinking he's weak, that his own wife was unfaithful, and he does nothing about it, things could get dicey."

What Kalos is saying makes sense, but even with how ruthless Stoneheart can be and has been, I can't imagine he'd reject Stella. He's possessive of her.

But he also lies to himself about his own feelings.

"Who knows what will happen with the territory. They have their own lady out delivering charms of protection herself," Kalos continues with the wave of his hand.

That doesn't sound right. Kalos would eat his hoard before allowing Katarina to be so vulnerable.

It's a good move on Stella's part to engender good will, but Stoneheart had been furious the time we'd gone to the owl women's place.

Why would he allow Stella to be so open to attack now?

Could there be trouble between them? It would be a simple thing to tap into the bond and see if they are content, but I don't allow myself that. I

need to remain separate. My place isn't between a husband and wife.

"Stoneheart won't let anything happen to her," I say.

"If you say so," Kalos says, his voice softens. "I'd hate for anything to happen that you'd regret not being there."

That sentiment makes my breath catch for a moment. Regret is an impossible subject.

"I won't abandon my family," I snap.

Kalos sighs, and I feel a pang that I've disappointed him.

"With how capable you've become, I forget how painfully young you are," he says, but it's not disappointment in his gaze. It's understanding. "I know a thing or two about not getting attached. Are you planning on dissolving the bonds?"

I rear back at the question. "How did you know?"

"It was a guess. I do know you rather well."

I duck my head at how obvious his ploy was and in guilt over what I just acknowledged.

"It was an accident," I say.

"That's not unheard of for your kind. Some would say it's even a gift." Kalos would say that. He'd been unable to bond since the deaths of his son and former mate centuries ago. "Do you think either of them would be upset by a bond?"

My blush deepens that he's guessed that I'm bonded not just to Stella, but to Stoneheart as well. "It doesn't matter. I don't belong with them. My position is here."

"Yet, you didn't form bonds to anyone here, platonic or otherwise."

"I'm hardly a demon—"

"Nonsense. Being separated from your heritage doesn't make you any less of a demon. The fact is, they are what instigated the change."

And I miss them terribly, but this is the logical conclusion of what we were playing at. Better to have a clean cut now.

"We're your family, and we want what is best for you." Kalos looks wistful now. "And that means facing the fact that you've outgrown us."

Anxiety clogs my throat. "Are you sending me away?"

"Of course not, but you'll regret staying."

"You don't understand." They don't need me. I'm ancillary to their relationship. I could be deprived of everything if they so choose. I have no

claim, something that became painfully clear when I'd realized I'd fathered Stella's child.

Kalos waits, but I have nothing left to say. I won't cause the two that own my heart more trouble than I already have.

I'll accept the pain of separation rather than risk them.

Kalos rolls his eyes. "Stay stubborn then. We'll see what fate has in store for you."

The words sound like a threat.

REMY

“LEAVE THE DOOR OPEN,” I instruct Silas as our guests enter the library. I want what is said in this room to spread like wildfire. Maybe we’ll get lucky, and that Leonid chef will be delivering food at exactly the right time.

We’re due some luck.

If luck alludes us, my inner circle can spread gossip as well as the rest of them if given leave.

Silas stands next to the doorway, giving the esteemed visitors the illusion of privacy.

If it were real privacy, I may have given into the urge to strangle the smug look off Councilor McConnell’s face, but it wouldn’t do to attack someone on the Council.

Councilor Moon nods in appreciation, probably sensing my restraint. This isn’t going to be good. The immortal’s lips are pressed thin in annoyance.

“To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?” I ask, taking a seat behind the long table. Moon and McConnell do the same across from me. The excited energy coming off the wolf shifter in waves leaves a bad taste in my mouth. McConnell resembles his nephew, but being around Lobo has never given me an instinctual recoil.

“I’m here as your representative,” Moon starts. “McConnell approached me about witnessing and validating the terms of what he’s going to offer you today.”

We expected some machinations. A tactic more direct than spreading rumors. That it's coming to pass should be convenient, yet it only leaves me as cold as my marriage bed has been since Ben's departure and my own floundering at the news of Stella's pregnancy.

I don't regret many things, but my reaction to the knowledge that the babe isn't mine by blood is one that will stay with me.

All the space I give her in the world does not make up for that moment of jealousy.

McConnell leans forward, his eyes glinting in the way of someone who thinks they've won. "I feel like we've gotten off on the wrong foot."

I raise a brow. "You've made motions to take from me what is mine."

The councilor shrugs. "A consequence of your alliance with Kalos I assure you. Nothing personal."

It felt very personal when we chose to create an heir to circumvent his plans, but I keep the thought to myself, curious as to what he's going to say.

"It occurs to a portion of the Council that Kalos seems to have gotten the better hand in your alliance. This territory is unstable, and the bride you were forced to take..." McConnell trails off and shrugs as if we're both in on a joke. "A territory leader such as you shouldn't be hemmed in so much. I think we can come to an agreement that benefits the both of us."

I tilt my head. "I'm listening."

McConnell grins like I've done more than give him the rope to hang himself with. "We're in the process of building a rather extensive case against the dragon."

I catch Moon's eye roll. I don't know how he stands working with these people.

The wolf shifter continues. "And it would be easier for us to try him for the death of Lorenzo Leonid if you were to cooperate."

"And what's in it for me?" I ask.

"Well, you'd be able to dissolve your marriage for one." McConnell laughs, expecting me to join in, before the sound dies on his tongue.

"What would happen to my wife?" The words are neutral, but this wolf shifter has gone from a nuisance to a risk.

“Stella Elderflower would stand trial with Kalos. She was never an official heir so the laws of her ascension and what was allowed to happen are a little fuzzy. Your presence was really what made it all go through so seamlessly for them. Without you, they will face the brunt end of the law.”

I hum and hide my clenched fist below the table. “And the territory?”

McConnell twitches. He doesn’t like this part. “We could be convinced to side with you should you campaign to take it over.”

They must need my cooperation greatly to offer such a boon. Without the interference of his faction and snuffing out Frank and Leo Leonid for good, the territory would be stable and mine without a fuss.

It’s a good deal.

I can see why he thinks I’m going to take it.

I’ve been distant from Stella since the conception, even not objecting to her demand to deliver the charms herself. No one save Silas knows that I followed on roof tops to ensure her safety.

All the secrecy and coldness because I wanted to see what strategy they were going to bring me. That and my ignorance of how to bridge the gaping wound I opened between my wife and me.

I believe Ben could have been reasoned with about the bonding. That he eventually would have realized that the metaphysical thing would grant him and her happiness, stability, but that the revelation occurred right when the knowledge of the pregnancy and the parentage...his feeling overwhelmed is understandable.

I will get him back, just as I will set things right with my firefly.

McConnell has shown me his hand, now it’s time to play my own.

“You seem to be under the mistaken impression that I don’t care for my wife,” I say.

The confident look on McConnell’s face fades, and I continue, my own satisfaction rising.

“That I don’t love her.” The word scrapes against the insides of my chest. Too honest for my liking. “She is my mate and the mother of my child.”

Silence reigns. I’ve melted the shifter’s brain.

Eventually he realizes what I’ve said does not match up with what he expected.

“You would claim someone else’s child?” he sputters.

Moon ducks his head to hide his smile.

“The child is mine,” I growl with meaning. “My heir and the product of my clan.”

That Ben hasn’t made any official moves required to be considered in a clan is of little consequence.

I resisted the idea of creating a clan at the beginning, but it’s the best way to have everything we want. Allowing my tainted memories to steal that from us is a mistake.

The Bramblewicks have a healthy clan. There’s no reason why Stella, Ben, and I couldn’t be a solid grouping. As long as they forgive me.

“But—” McConnell starts, but my patience for this game is at an end, and I cut him off.

“So I do take your offer as the greatest insult. I advise that you leave here.” I snap my teeth. “With haste.”

“You can’t speak to me in such a way,” McConnell says. “Moon!”

Councilor Moon straightens and stands. “Territory leaders and the Council exist in a symbiotic relationship. Stoneheart has the right to take issue with what you’ve offered.”

The wolf shifter snarls at me. “You’ll regret siding against me.”

“And you’ll regret continuing to pursue or support any plans that target my wife,” I say.

“Are you threatening me?” the wolf shifter says as if he didn’t just issue his own threat.

My smile is sharp. “A promise. You would do to have greater care when it comes to me. I have more allies than just Kalos, and the other territory leaders wouldn’t enjoy hearing just what you’re willing to stoop to for your vendetta.”

McConnell snarls but marches from the room.

“Congratulations on your heir,” Moon says before he follows his fellow councilor.

“You just keep making friends left and right,” Silas says.

I sigh, tired now that the risk to mine has left. I close my eyes and massage the bridge of my nose. “It’s a gift.”

“Perhaps you should go speak to this wife you’ve just thrown down the gauntlet for. While I start the paperwork for your currently nonexistent clan.”

“She was here?” I straighten.

“Left in a hurry too.” Silas pauses a moment. “I think she’s sick.”

That’s all it takes for me to move. I may have given her the space she demanded, but that doesn’t apply to if she’s ill.

STELLA

I REST my head on the toilet seat, wanting the awful feeling in my stomach to stop, but appreciating that the vomiting has subsided. I need to stand and wash my mouth out, but I don't want to risk moving.

It's much easier to just stay down for the count and try to process what I just overheard.

There's a knock on the door.

"Stella."

I close my eyes at the sound of Stoneheart's voice. I can't handle this right now. What he said in the library is making my head spin, and I'm already nauseated enough.

"No, no, no," I murmur before raising my voice. "I'm fine."

I gag on that last word as if my body is rejecting my lie.

There's silence, and I think he's left the bedroom. I'd run here for privacy. I'd been feeling queasy, but hearing Stoneheart come to my defense and claim the baby after the upset of the man in the library detailing his plan to have me put on trial, had been too much. The waves of emotion flung me overboard.

So vomit.

"I'm coming in," he says.

I move to lift my head so at least I can retain some dignity, but alas my stomach heaves again, and I throw up.

My eyes squeeze shut afterward. Maybe he left? But someone other than me flushes the toilet, and I lay my cheek on the cool seat again,

wanting to sob.

“Go away,” I say, but instead of abandoning me like last time, his claws comb through my hair. The soft tickle on my scalp makes my muscles ease without permission, and I can’t help sighing in relief.

“I think I was too hasty in my jealousy,” he says. The words are soft with only a hint of amusement in them.

“Gods above, save me from you and your mood swings. Leave me to do this in peace,” I say but completely without the feeling that should be there.

He pulls my hair back softly, holding it in place so the next awful retch doesn’t catch it. I’m hopeful there won’t be another one, but with how it’s been going, I’m not willing to place bets.

“I’ve caused you so much pain,” he says instead of reacting to my statement. “Far better that it’s Ben’s fault that you’re miserable this time.”

My laugh echoes disgustingly in the toilet bowl. I guess we’re having this conversation now. After a moment when I’m sure that my stomach is stable, I suck in a breath and slowly sit up, wanting to see his face.

“Did you mean it?” I ask.

“Which part?”

I swallow. “About the baby being yours?”

I don’t dare ask about him saying he loved me. It was probably just an act for the councilors, and I can only take so much misery at one time.

Stoneheart heaves a deep sigh. “May I hold you?”

I hesitate. “I really need to rinse my mouth out.”

Stoneheart takes that as permission, and I don’t fight him when he gathers me into his arms. He stands and carries me to the sink, filling a glass while I’m cradled to his chest.

I take the water and try to rinse out my mouth as elegantly as I can, which is not possible, before sipping some and putting it down. Stoneheart dampens a washcloth and wipes my hot cheeks and forehead. The coolness almost has me moaning before it’s gone.

Stoneheart lifts me again, and my head falls against his chest. His scent soothes my stomach more than anything has been able to yet.

It’s so easy to let him care for me. It’s probably a weakness, but I’ve felt so lonely and gross since that first day

Anger doesn't keep you warm at night, and frustration doesn't ease the nausea attempting to climb up my throat all the time.

I'm not a big fan of being pregnant so far.

He sits on the bed, and a pang tightens my throat. He hasn't answered me yet.

"People tell me I must have been born hungry," he says. "And maybe that's a part of it, but I wasn't allowed to own much growing up in the clan that I did with the heritage I have."

I want to ask questions, but I don't interrupt. Stoneheart's words vibrate through his chest, both hypnotizing and calming me.

"It's not an excuse, but it affects me. Makes me greedy in all things." He pauses. "Especially when it comes to you."

His brow creases in pain I want to wipe away, but I'm supposed to be angry with him still.

"I am very sorry that I reacted badly to the knowledge that the child you carry is Ben's. I was jealous," he says.

"And now you're not?"

"In that moment, it felt like you were being snatched away from me. It took time for me to realize that I was my own worst enemy, and the real reason you turned away was me."

"You're allowed to be disappointed that it's not yours," I whisper. I'm not sure if I'm disappointed or not myself. I try not to think too much about it. I want the baby, I even want it to be part Ben, but it's scary the idea of caring for something so fragile.

"I'm not. That it's yours is the most important fact." He hesitates. "But will you allow me to claim parentage of the child? To help raise it with you?"

I stiffen. "I don't want to take that from Ben. Even if he doesn't want it."

Stoneheart relaxes. "I'm sure the demon will come to his senses eventually. Gargoyle clans share the term parent when it comes to those in relationships with multiple mates. We'd both be the father if you wished it."

"I want that." It sounds like a fantasy. "But do you think he's really coming back? He accused us of trapping him." I shake my head, getting upset all over again.

“Ah,” he says with a wince. “He may have a reason for that.”

I narrow my eyes. “What did you do?”

“I technically didn’t do anything.”

Ha.

Stoneheart continues, “I only put the pieces together for the best possible outcome.”

I raise my brows, waiting.

He huffs. “Demons bond naturally. I knew it was a possibility if you two spent a lot of time together and shared deep feelings.”

“So, you were waiting for his nature to do the work for you? And Ben didn’t anticipate that?” I ask, rubbing my chest.

Stoneheart shifts in discomfort. “Apparently he isn’t very familiar with his demon lineage or the ins and outs of it.”

Did we bond? I don’t ask it out loud because I don’t need to. The connection exists, it’s so subtle, I’d miss it if I wasn’t looking. I’d chalked the distant sensation as a fanciful thing.

“That explains it,” I say, thoughtful and sad. Ben would feel trapped especially if it wasn’t something he planned on.

But does Stoneheart know that he’s involved? Because I feel him. Felt him when he realized I’d broken apart the labradorite when he knew it symbolized something more to me.

There are too many questions that neither of us can answer without a certain demon’s presence.

But Ben left.

And despite Stoneheart’s confidence, I don’t think he’s coming back.

REMY

TOUCHING STELLA after days of distance and her ire is a gift. It makes me hesitant to let her go, so I don't. We stay in the bed and enjoy the solace of being together.

I'm able to get her to stomach a few bites of lunch before coaxing her into taking a nap, her head on my lap. I don't think she's slept in the bed for more than an hour at a time since Ben left. Tiredness gives the skin under her eyes a purple hue.

I should have guessed she's been feeling sick.

I lean back against the headboard and do work tasks on my phone with one hand and stroke her hair with the other, marveling at the peace.

There's a part of us missing, but my starved heart will accept this moment.

I'm surprised that she's forgiven me. Perhaps if she was feeling better, it would be more of a struggle, but I won't question my fortune.

But Ben was right. She deserves more. She deserves everything.

So when she hums and blinks her eyes awake, I give it.

"You didn't ask," I say. "But I meant what I said about my feelings for you."

She freezes. The hope on her face confirms that withholding this made me the worst kind of husband and...mate. I clear my throat from that discomfort.

"I love you, Stella. It's not something that I chose, and the world and territory may be damned for it, but it's too late." The feeling in my chest is

heavy even as her eyes are soft and bright.

“Are you still worried that your love is destructive?” she asks like she’s afraid that this is a dream.

I snort. “Merely you being mad at me would have been a catastrophe for everyone if I had not convinced myself that eventually I’d get you forgive me.”

She shakes her head slowly. “Arrogant gargoyle. You don’t keep the world spinning.”

My lips twitch, but I grow serious. “But many vulnerable people do rely on me.”

She sits up and takes my hand, placing it on her flat stomach. The gesture gives me pause. The idea of what she carries is hard to fathom when less than a week ago it didn’t exist.

Stella breaks me from my reverie. “If I were to fall, would you leave our child defenseless?”

“Never,” I hiss. The reaction is instinctual. Abandon our child? One who is a combination of the two people who burn in my soul?

I’m stunned for a moment at the discovery.

My heart beats for her no matter how much I tried to keep it out of the equation, but if the worst were to happen...it would keep beating.

A part of me would die without her, but I’d never leave our child to suffer as I did. The baby is mine to protect as its mother is mine to love.

Stella tilts her head as if privy to my own revelations. “I think love is an expansive thing. It only robs us if we close ourselves off.”

Her hand slides up my neck, thumb rubbing my cheek with affection.

“You will not crumble even if you have softened for me, and you won’t abandon those who need you because in your own way, you love them. Even Silas.” she teases. “It’s the nature of your protective feelings. Those aren’t born from responsibility.”

I inhale, not quite believing the sentiment. “You put a lot of faith in me.”

“You deserve it. Even when you make mistakes. Even when you try and play us all like pieces. Which you shouldn’t, by the way,” she adds in.

Parts of that are hard to swallow, but there is a bright truth to it.

I am not my father.

The simplicity of it makes me want to retreat, but I repeat the words as a mantra, needing them to stay. Things would have gone very differently if I'd believed them from the beginning.

But perhaps that prior flawed belief was needed. Ben wouldn't have stayed initially if he thought Stella had my heart. And then he wouldn't have become as essential to me as she is.

I clear my throat. Thoughts for a different time.

"Do I also deserve to hear how you feel about me?" I ask, longing for the words she spoke silently against my skin like the worst kept secret.

Stella's laugh is soft. "Oh, now you want to know?"

"I know," I say, pulling her fully onto my lap, enjoying the solid weight of her. It's a precious thing that she's never hidden her emotions from me. "You are as generous with your heart as you are wise. But I'm a simple gargoyle who wants to hear the words from your lips."

Those pink lips quirk. "I love you. I think a part of me always has. No matter how hard you've made it."

I snort.

"I promise I'll care for your heart and our family till my dying days. All of our family," I say with emphasis. "Even errant demons who think they know better."

Stella gives me a flat look.

"You can't make Ben love us back."

That's what she thinks.

STELLA

AS THE DAYS PASS, we find a comfortable pattern together. Pressures from the territory plague us, and pregnancy symptoms still suck, but we fall together like puzzle pieces.

Stoneheart has to go out to meetings with people in the territory but always comes home early enough to force me not to overwork and to find food items that at least sound appetizing.

His hand on my stomach while we fall asleep helps the worst of my anxiety.

And feeling gross is easier to handle when a growly gargoyle is holding you. It doesn't make the ache for Ben hurt less, but I can at least focus on getting more charms done, and Stoneheart doesn't even make too much of a fuss about me delivering them.

I munch on my cereal, figures that sugary cereal is what settles best right now, and frown at my phone.

Stoneheart makes a sound and finishes chewing his omelet that I can't look too closely at, or I won't be able to finish my breakfast.

"What's bothering you?" he asks.

"My mom wants to meet up. She'll even venture into the territory for it." Which is a surprise because I've never known her to pass the border here after leaving when she was cast out.

"And you don't want to?" he asks. "She's probably heard about the pregnancy."

I'd be shocked if she hadn't. The official news of the pregnancy and Stoneheart naming the baby his heir had spread through the territory like wildfire.

Despite my worries that the parentage would cause upset, I've received very warm congratulations any time I go out.

"It's not that I don't want to see her," I say. Mom was the first one I wanted to ask for advice when I found out I was pregnant. "But she made me doubt. I don't want to go on that emotional rollercoaster again."

It's why I haven't called to tell her the news myself. Her caustic words about an heir linger.

But she's making the effort.

Stoneheart rubs my back. "Do you still have the same doubts?"

"No." I'm doing the things I set out to do. The sentiment in the territory already feels better than just a few days ago. The voting is in about a week, and I'm hopeful it will work out no matter who tries to interfere.

"It's your choice," Stoneheart says. "But I don't want you to feel lacking for anything, including your mother. Even if she doesn't like me."

I bite my lip, deciding. "It would be good to touch base with her."

"I'll send Fiona to tail you."

Silas, who is on the other side of the dining table working on his phone stiffens.

"Three bodyguards are a bit much," I say. "I'll already have Andrew and Connors."

Fiona has let me rest up since getting pregnant but threatens that it's only a matter of time before we're back to training in the mornings. I'm positive she's a sadist.

Stoneheart makes a noncommittal noise, and I roll my eyes.

"I'm sure there's a better job she could be doing."

"Perhaps, but it's been too quiet." He shrugs.

"That's not a reason to be paranoid," I say. "We can't just keep expecting the worst of everyone here."



I SPIN my wedding ring the whole way to the coffee shop Mom and I selected to meet at. The metals hum at me in comfort and loyalty. Stoneheart did select the perfect gift to me. Even the ring he placed on my thumb to protect against long-range attacks hums sweetly in time. That one still gives me hints of obsession and want.

I have to keep from messing with that one too much unless I want to get horny.

We haven't had sex since Ben left. I'd be worried, but with how awful I feel all the time, it's hardly a sign of a broken relationship.

We'll find our way back to each other eventually. I'm planning my own courtship gift.

I've slowly been working on a project after finishing with charms each day. I justify the energy expenditure because it's really not that much to craft a charm in the beginning stages. I'll wait until after the voting to really layer on some of the intentions I'm wanting.

I feel guilty about breaking apart the labradorite. The least I can do is use one of the pieces to give Stoneheart a replacement for the ring he gave me with some more protections interwoven in. I pass the time thinking about metal mixtures and what would look best with his other rings to distract myself from nerves.

When the car stops, I'm out in a blur and ducking into the building. The café is cozy with plush armchairs and little nooks for privacy.

I see her near the window, and my steps quicken without me meaning to. She stands and hugs me tightly. The doubts and ugly feelings from before wash away under her embrace.

"I'm so sorry," she says into my hair. "I let my anger and fear run the show."

My throat swells as I breathe in her green scent. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you."

"You already apologized." She continues, "I didn't mean to imply you were a bad leader. You can always do anything you put your mind to."

I pull back, hesitant to let go.

"Do you mean it?" The question slips out of me no matter that I just assured Stoneheart this morning that I'd quieted those doubts.

Her smile is all wry pride. "You don't need me to answer that. Your choices aren't what I would have chosen, but that's what makes you

unstoppable. You've already been quite busy from what I hear."

I blush.

"Here, sit. I got you a chai. The ginger will help your stomach."

I sit awkwardly, but the spices wafting from the hot cup in front of me are welcome. "It's not like you didn't predict that an heir would be an issue."

"Hush. It was wrong of me to assume so many things about your situation."

"I understand why you did."

She swallows and puts a hand to her chest. "Thank you. It did hit a little close to home for me, but I want us to be past that. I don't want that history to haunt this new future."

A tightness in my chest releases. I want that too. A lot.

"So..." she starts. "I've heard the news."

"What have you heard?" I ask more to establish what the gossip is saying rather than to hide the truth from her.

Mom laughs. "Well, there are a few rumors going around, but the loudest is that you're pregnant by someone in your clan and that Stoneheart claims the child as his heir."

I nod. Ben's scent is mostly unknown since he'd been wearing the charm nearly the whole time he was here. It would make sense that they don't quite know who fathered the baby.

"It's not quite so clean cut..." I trail off.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

My lower lip trembles for a moment, and I shake my head. I don't want to talk about Ben. Maybe someday it will be easier to talk about, and I'll go over the whole story, but he's out of the picture now, and every day he stays gone emphasizes that.

"Were you scared of becoming a mom?" I ask.

"Oh, honey." Her face softens. "Of course I was, but then you were here, and you were...everything. Just like this baby is going to be everything."

"Yeah?"

"Yes. You're in the process of wrangling a whole territory. You can do this part. You have help." She squeezes my hand in comfort.

“Sometimes I feel like if I didn’t have Stoneheart supporting me that I’d spiral out of control,” I confess, but feel better. This was the side of my mom I’ve missed the most.

Mom’s lips curve. “He’s an interesting fellow. A little cold, but it was reassuring when he visited me.”

I frown. “He visited you? When?”

“A few days ago. It gave me quite a fright in my garden at first.” Her mouth thins. “Carl must have been nearby because he made a show like he was going to protect me from his boss.”

She shakes her head. “But Stoneheart apologized for not meeting me before the nuptials and made promises that you would have everything you ever needed.”

Her mouth quirks, and I hang on every word. “He implored me to forgive that you hid so much from me, said that it all came about so quickly. It was a short visit.”

I blink. “I didn’t know.”

A few days ago, we weren’t speaking. While I’d closed myself off in my workshop, he’d reached out to her. We’d just lost Ben, and he’d thought to make sure I had all the other support I needed.

I’m touched.

Mom nods. “I already knew I needed to apologize, but meeting him, knowing that history wasn’t repeating itself, made it all easier. Now if only he’d do something about his watchdog.”

There’s a twist to her mouth that isn’t for Stoneheart.

“You know,” I start. “Carl went against Stoneheart’s orders when he didn’t tell him you were coming home early. He’s obviously very into you.”

She rolls her eyes. “He followed me here.”

I raise my brows and look around, finding him in the back of the café, reading a paper. I feel better that someone is watching out for her, but if she’s uncomfortable around him...

“Do you want Stoneheart to recall him?”

She blows out a breath in frustration, conflict marring her features before they smooth. “No. I...I like him around.”

I tilt my head. “I’ve always liked him. I’m sorry he lied and is Stoneheart’s man.”

She shrugs. “Stoneheart says he’s my man now. I was a little afraid to ask him what he means.”

“Probably that his loyalty is to you before Stoneheart.” Which makes sense with how he moved to protect her from Stoneheart.

She changes the subject to ask about where I’m living now, and I talk about the penthouse and all Stoneheart’s people who are now mine that I live with.

Eventually our cups are empty, and we hug each other goodbye. I have to get back to delivering charms, and she has her emotions about a certain wolf shifter to figure out.

I feel lighter when I climb into the car.

The disturbance in my middle hums against my magic, and I move to soothe it without thinking.

“Grandma loves you,” I say and inhale, letting the worst of my expectations disintegrate. For all that I lectured Stoneheart about expecting the worst from people, I’m not much better. “And one of your dads is ready to go to war to protect you. We aren’t alone.”

I can do this.

I look out on the streets as they pass. The paranormal beings who notice the car tilt their heads in acknowledgment.

“Everything is going to be okay,” I say more to myself than the barely-there baby.

I frown. It takes a full minute to clock what feels off.

The car is going the wrong way.

I press the intercom button. “Hey, Andrew, the charm delivery is nearer to the Firefly, not farther away.”

Connors isn’t in the passenger seat. How did I miss that?

The hair on the back of my neck raises.

“Just sit back and enjoy the ride,” Andrew says. It sounds like him, but the tone of his voice sounds wrong. There’s a cruel mockery to it when he’s usually painfully respectful.

I keep my breathing even and check my phone. No service. There’s probably something blocking the signal.

No calling for help.

Now that I’m not distracted, the protective magic that usually intertwines around the car is off. The charms instead of just keeping

people out are now tightened to keep me in.
I've stepped into a trap.

REMY

I SIT BACK in my seat as Silas leads the mayor from my library. The meeting went well, but I'm distracted. If Stella wasn't out delivering charms, I'd head to her workshop and just *be* with her.

But Stella isn't the only one I'm courting.

I have time before my next meeting, and I'm going to make it count. I hit call button on my phone. Unsurprisingly, he hasn't responded to any texts.

It's been a week. He should be grateful I gave him that long.

He doesn't answer the first call. I'm willing to make this official and go through Kalos to talk to him, but that would be messy, and the dragon is hardly going to welcome me right now.

I dial again.

"What do you want?" Ben answers the phone.

"Is that how you answer the phone for everyone, or am I just special?"
I purr.

"Is this business related?"

"Do you want it to be?"

"Remy," Ben hisses in annoyance.

My eyes close at the sound of him saying my name. I miss him. We both do, even if she doesn't bring it up. "Stella thinks you're not coming back."

"I'm not."

“That’s impossible,” I say. Because it is. One way or another, I’ll get him back. Stella thinks she’s made peace with his absence, but I see the flashes of pain when her thoughts wander.

I experience my own loss, but it’s buffered by my confidence.

I know he wants to come back, so it’s just a matter of strategy.

He sighs. “Just because you decree something doesn’t make it so.”

“Would it make you feel better if I detailed all the possibilities of how I was going to entrap you?” I lean back, wishing he was here so I could entrance him with more than my words.

“Why would that make me feel better?” he asks, caught off guard.

“I wonder if you’re so upset because you didn’t see the strategy coming. I want you to know how far I was willing to go.” Still willing to go.

“You’re deranged,” he says.

That isn’t a no.

“The simplest would be to chain you to our bed. It would have caused problems with Kalos and threatened a war, but I find that’s not so terrible of an idea now...” I trail off, smiling when he clears his throat.

“Stella saved you from the easiest one. The pressure of everyone knowing who you’re fucking by scent alone. I planned to slather you in it. The rumors would have started small until they reached a fever pitch, and I’d convince you to allow me to claim you.”

“Stoneheart,” he says, trying to sound stern, but he still doesn’t get it.

“I considered making political moves that would have put you in a bad position with Kalos and have him question your loyalty. He’d have no choice but to release you from your position. That was a spotty plan because it’s hard to make that dragon do anything he doesn’t want to do.”

Ben makes a frustrated noise. “You would have threatened your alliance?”

“I’d threaten everything but the people I love and the baby who is on the way, if it meant having you back,” I confess. Such is the deviance of love. I recognize that I’m not my father. I wouldn’t choose a permanent sleep, but I’d burn down plenty to have my family healthy and whole.

I think I’ve stunned him.

“I’m upset,” he starts. “Because I bonded with the two of you by accident.”

I blink, but the surprise only lasts a moment. Of course he's bonded to me as well as to her. That's logical.

"You haven't broken the bonds?" I guess. I'm rather an insensitive creature when it comes to magic.

Silence.

Victory. He doubts enough that I'm going to sneak into his heart whether he means me to or not.

"Do you think we'd reject these bonds if given the choice? Because if you asked, I'd tell you what I want," I say.

"Neither of you need me." He sounds plaintive now.

I don't promise that we need him because he's told himself this lie for so long that he won't believe it just because I reject it.

My next words are harsh, they're meant to be. "Whatever drivel stalks your mind, your time is running out. Come back to us."

"I can't."

"Do not make me hunt you down," I warn and his breath stutters on the other side of the line. "You'll only make it worse for yourself when I catch up to you." I let my words hang in the air before adding, "If not for my sake, for Stella's."

I end the call on his pained indrawn breath. The board is set.

So fucking stubborn, not that I'd want him to be any less. It makes sense why we are so compatible.

Silas gives an aggravated sigh, having caught the tail end of the conversation. "If you want to dirty talk your lovers, can you please give me enough warning to leave?"

"Sorry." My smile is wry. "I thought I could keep it professional."

Silas rolls his eyes. "Yes, detailing all the ways you'd wage war for him. Thank you for that. Thank the gods Stella would talk you down."

I shrug. Perhaps.

Andrew enters the library. "I have the report on the north side you sent for."

I frown. "What are you doing here? You're supposed to be guarding Stella with Connors."

I saw him leave with them.

Andrew looks confused. "No, you messaged me this morning that you wanted this report. Said you were sending someone else."

“I didn’t message you,” I say at the same time Silas says. “I did those reports yesterday.”

The confusion falls from Andrew’s face, and he pales as the reality of the situation becomes known.

Panic is a foreign thing to me, but that doesn’t stop it from flooding my veins.

“Who is with my wife?”

STELLA

ONCE WE LEAVE THE CITY, it doesn't take long to figure out where Andrew is heading.

Apparently, the Leonid compound is not so abandoned anymore

"*Fuck, fuck fuck,*" I whisper. We should have leveled the whole thing, or at least dismantled the stupid spell that only admits blood relatives and those invited.

I tighten my grip around my phone, willing it to work. To create a lifeline that will get me and my little disturbance out of here.

Fear and frustration mix. Just when I felt like I was getting a handle of the situation, this shit happens.

Maybe Stoneheart sent Fiona after I argued against it. But wouldn't she have swooped in already?

Bargaining it is. I don't know what is making Andrew do this, maybe he's been a spy from the beginning, but surely, he can be reasoned with.

"You don't have to do this," I say into the intercom.

He laughs, again sounding so different from the young man I know.

"Of course I don't. I want to."

"Stoneheart—" I start.

"Will get exactly what's coming for him. And you're going to help."

That's not ominous at all. *Think, Stella, think.* But nothing comes to me.

The building rises past the trees, and I swallow on the impending doom. I have nothing against modern architecture. I love the Firefly. But

the Leonid compound more closely resembles a prison in shape, and the dark color doesn't do it any favors. It's brutal. There may be no barbed wire fence, but the defensive magic is heavy in the very bricks of it. The trees of the forest give the space its own berth.

The feeling of the place had been oppressive enough the one time I snuck in there to take back what they stole from Kalos.

If they get me inside there...

The car slows as we pull up to the entrance. There's a group of men there. Two of them are familiar, but it takes a moment to recognize them. I've only met them once and they're looking a little haggard even if they still wear suits, trying to project an air of authority.

Being in hiding hasn't been kind to them.

My uncle Frank looks to be in his fifties, and my half brother Leo should look my age, but has new lines on his face. There are a few mercenary-looking guys in tactical gear behind them.

Frank opens the car door and leers in at me. "If it isn't my long-lost niece. Get out of the car."

The only thing I can do right now is stall. I grip the seat, determined to stay exactly where I am. Someone will come for me, and I'm going to wait for my opening until then.

"Good work," Frank says as Andrew saunters into view.

"They didn't suspect a thing. Poor Andrew is probably still on a wild goose chase." His expression shifts showing some guilt, but it's gone again before the other men in the group can catch it.

I blink in confusion. His brother. Andrew has a brother. He didn't say he was a twin, but I guess that's not the sort of thing that comes up in conversation.

"You'd make this easier on yourself if you cooperate," my uncle says.

"I have no reason to believe you," I say.

Frank's smile is cloyingly fake. "No, but you'll have fewer bruises in the end. We wouldn't want you to lose any precious cargo."

My throat tightens with fear, and I suppress the urge to cover my stomach with a protective hand. Fuck these guys.

"I'd think it would be better for you to kill me," I say, but my voice is high no matter how casual I try to sound.

“Don’t mistake my intentions. I would.” His eyes are cruel. “But the Council needs its scapegoat. With Stoneheart out of the way, they’ll be able to go through with their plan for Kalos.”

The Council, at least the faction McConnell is a part of, is working with these guys. Fan-fucking-tastic. I don’t know how they mean to get Stoneheart out of the way, but before I can reason about it, Frank sighs and lifts his chin at Not-Andrew.

Not-Andrew isn’t much larger than I am, but he is a lion shifter and stronger. He reaches into the car and grips my arm, pulling. His fingers dig in bruising me.

I attempt to make his job harder by using my legs against the doorway to stay put, but when he pulls back like he’s going to hit my stomach, I flinch away, and he drags me out.

I’m shaking and squint in the sunlight.

“That wasn’t so hard, was it?” Frank asks, rolling his eyes. “We only need you as the bait. It doesn’t have to be a fight.”

My heart falls. That’s how they’re getting at Stoneheart.

“I wouldn’t mind her roughed up. She’s the reason we’ve had to hide in the first place.” Leo speaks for the first time, and his voice has an obnoxious whine.

Frank just shrugs. “You go against a dragon with a shit plan, and shit happens. Lorenzo should have listened to me. Let’s get inside.”

“No!” I yell, and my fear shakes loose enough for me to struggle against Not-Andrew’s hold. I can’t be taken in there.

The men laugh at my struggles, but they cut off when thud sounds near my ear.

Not-Andrew’s grip loosens, and I pull away. He has a knife sticking out of his chest. His shock is gruesome and matches mine and everyone else’s.

“Run!” Fiona shouts from the camouflage of the surrounding trees, and her voice spurs me forward as chaos breaks out behind me. A flare of fire magic from the mercenaries gets thrown. Another man cries out as if he’s hit by something.

I nearly trip over the rocks surrounding the paved road but make a mad dash away from the building. Everything happens so fast. It feels like I’ve run a mile, but the building is still in sight when something catches hold and yanks me backward.

“Got you!” Leo’s breath is rank, and I cry out when he twists my arm behind me. “Looks like I can get my pound of flesh after all.”

He twists the arm cruelly, and I sob.

A roar breaks through the pain, and a shadow blocks out the sun.

The sound is primal and makes me want to drop to the ground to cower even as the relief is quick. I can’t imagine what it sparks in the heart of the enemy.

Stoneheart is here.

“Finally!” Leo says, keeping a firm hold on me while he retrieves something from his breast pocket. “This had better work. It was made special for him after all.”

My reaction is instant. I can’t let myself be used to lure him in.

I stomp on his foot as hard as I can, and the rest of the training Fiona has tried to drill into me surfaces enough for me to break his hold. I stumble away, but it’s too late.

A large gray body swoops past, tackling Leo to the ground.

Powder fills the air around them, and Leo laughs before gurgling when Stoneheart crushes his throat. The crack of my half brother’s spine results in silence.

No, no, no. I chant in my head.

Stoneheart stands, all lethal power. The powder clings to him and looks ridiculously like glittery soot, but the magic hanging in the air feels dark.

“Stoneheart—”

He doesn’t give me a chance to argue, just gathers me in his arms. With a beat of his powerful wings and the lurch of my stomach, we’re airborne.

Gods, I hate flying.

The sounds from the fighting shrink as we gain altitude. I catch the glint of glass windows as we enter the city line.

“I thought I lost you,” he says. “If Fiona hadn’t been tailing you—”

He breaks off with a huff, and my arms tighten around his neck when the glide of his wings falters.

Dread diminishes my fear of heights enough for me to take in his face. His icy gaze is disoriented. The hope that we’d left whatever spell Leo targeted him with behind dies in my chest.

“Remy—”

“I know,” he interrupts. “I feel it. I don’t have much time. I have to get you to safety.”

He’s been cursed.

The Firefly comes into view, and we soar up the side of the building.

His wings shake, and Stoneheart snarls. “Almost there.”

We land on top of the building without any of his usual grace. His wings stay extended because they’ve turned to stone.

“No, no, no,” I say, trying to wipe the soot from his chest as more patches of gray harden. I need metals, crystals, something! Tears blur my vision.

I’m helpless as the curse spreads over his skin.

“Listen to me, firefly,” Stoneheart says, and I can barely see his expression, but what I do see is full of acceptance. His hand cups my cheek. “I’ll love you longer than the mountains stand.”

“Stop!” I’m nonsensical at his calm. If anything, it makes me angrier. How can he be so calm when my world is ending?

He nuzzles the top of my head. “They couldn’t ask for a better leader.”

The flesh of his palm against my cheek stiffens and cools, turning to stone. I fall backward, but no one is there to catch me. Only a statue and the icy cold of the gravel under me.

All that’s left of my husband is lifeless rock.

STELLA

MY GRIEF IS A STALLED THING.

Momentum keeps me moving past every sharp wave of yearning that makes it hard to breath when I notice his absence.

Everything reminds me of him and what's happened. I want to wail and trap myself away, but I refuse to disappoint Stoneheart's last wish.

Instead, we move forward.

"There's no reason to believe he won't eventually wake up. Gargoyles do turn to stone to heal," Silas tries to reason. We all sit around the library table. No one dares to sit in Stoneheart's place, and the presence of the empty seat is a shadow on the proceedings.

Silas, Francesca, and Fiona wait to present the state of the territory.

They'd given me as much time as they could to clean up and calm myself. The sky outside is black, and the city lights glitter despite the yawning ache in my chest.

"One of the paid muscle captured said that the spell they had on hand for the gargoyle is a fae concoction," Fiona says. She has a black eye, and a burn covered with a bandage on her arm. Her voice lacks any of her usual playfulness. "He's not meant to wake up."

Silas looks like he wants to send her away to rest, but she's not going to be kept out of territory business. Not when we're shorthanded.

Connors is expected to live, but Caleb, Andrew's twin brother, got him good with a poison dagger. Andrew has been detained until he can be cleared of wrongdoing.

“Then we summon that scholar to look at it. There will be someone who can break the spell,” Silas says.

Francesca nods. “I’ll manage the other territory in the meantime. What do we tell everyone?”

They look to me.

I expected Remy to continue on if I fell. I never asked whether I could do the same, but I can’t stop. If not for the baby, for the people relying on me.

“We tell them he’s healing,” I say. It’s not a lie.

Silas nods in agreement. “We’ve retrieved Frank’s body. By the looks of it, and mind you, no one is saying they saw a thing, he was dragged from the compound after Fiona took out the mercenaries and killed by a group of people.” He blows out a breath. “That group of people then ripped apart the Leonid compound brick by brick.”

The people of the territory have spoken. The remaining Leonids had to be involved to get to him if he’d been hiding out in the compound.

Nothing feels right at the moment, but Frank’s end feels like justice.

“That’s one less thing to worry about.” My voice sounds even, but the room regards me with caution. “I’ll contact Rowan to look at the curse inflicting Stoneheart. He’ll be more receptive to my request.”



“THIS IS NASTY STUFF,” Rowan says, his hands hovering over Stoneheart. The moon is bright tonight and leaves a stronger cast shadow than the illumination of the pool some distance away. The rest of the roof is a world rock and patio stones, the minimal plants up here having gone dormant for the season.

I shiver in my sweater but lift my chin to the fae when he turns. Silas stands by my side, taking notes.

Rowan sighs. “I have some ideas, but the ingredients for a curse like this run toward the unsavory side.”

I mouth the word while he’s lost in thought. *Unsavory*.

He hesitates. “The counter spell may need to make use of the same ingredients.” His gaze beseeches mine, and it takes a moment to

understand. “It’s nothing I’ve ever worked with before and—”

“We can’t use them,” I interject. Rowan’s shoulders drop in relief as the hope that his presence provided flickers. My throat hurts. “We won’t use black market body parts.”

Silas also looks sickened, and for the life of me, I don’t know if it’s the fact that the magic makes use of such thing or if he’s disappointed at the line I’ve drawn. I trust it’s the first, but my guilt threatens to choke me.

Shouldn’t I be willing to do and pay anything to have Stoneheart back? But it can’t cost this.

“He wouldn’t want that,” I say, and it’s the truth even though it’s poor comfort. “It would ruin our credibility. We are here to protect people, and that is what we’ll do.”

Silas nods in support.

I hope I’m always strong enough to stick to this conviction, but in this moment, I’m going to do what I know Remy would want.

“We’ll find another way,” I decree.



“READY, MY LADY?” Rowan asks kindly.

I nod, trying not to choke on my hope that this will work. I warm the small blade against my palm, the sharp edge keeping me from getting lost in my wishes.

It’s been a week since I’ve heard Stoneheart’s voice or felt his arms.

The voting of the territory happens tomorrow, and I need him with me.

I’m not worried about the results. In a twist of ingenuity Fiona was able to bring enough evidence of meddling to the other territory leaders, and with the help of Lobo himself, McConnell has lost his seat on the Council.

The unnamed others in his faction have all pulled back for fear of their own positions being put at risk.

Lobo has proven an unlikely, but valuable ally. We don’t talk much, but the empathy he shows me when we do makes conversing both harder and easier. He knows what it’s like to lose someone.

Missing Stoneheart and Ben has left me a husk of myself, but a productive husk.

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” I say to no one in particular. It’s weird to have so many people up here with me. I visit Stoneheart every night. It’s usually a lonely vigil, where I talk to him and pretend he can hear my updates about what I’m doing with our territory.

Part of me longs to reach out to Ben, but every day he stays away without Stoneheart’s confidence to buoy me, a piece of my heart chips away. I don’t think I’m strong enough for him to reject me again.

I focus on the here and now to keep from dwelling on thoughts of him and how he should be here. The moon is darker tonight, and the air this high up is frigid, though the breeze is blessedly gentle.

“We need more candles,” Zena says, and Rowan makes a sound in agreement. I don’t know how I feel about the potion master. She’s... quirky, but her work is making this attempt to break the curse possible.

It’s lucky for us that Rowan heard rumors about a potion master researching unusual ingredient substitutions.

The extra candles Rowan adds flicker and cast shadows on the statue of Stoneheart in a way that makes it almost look like he’s moving.

Like this could really work.

I inhale.

“You know your part?” Rowan asks, and I nod. I have a simple task. I run my thumb over the blade, a meditation and prayer to any that will listen.

Zena finishes adding something dark and mushy to the wide golden bowl resting on the ground. The contents smell sharp with an underlying layer of butchered animal. I breathe through my mouth and try to keep my stomach from turning more than it usually does.

The territory has kept me busy enough not to dwell on how awful I still feel every day. Whoever said that pregnancy is full of joy can walk off a cliff.

Rowan starts an incantation in a lilting language that must be fae. The feel of the air shifts, and Zena lights the contents of the bowl. There must be something in there to help it burn because the flame is sudden and powerful.

Rowan’s chanting gets louder and louder until he looks over at me.

That's my cue.

I don't let myself hesitate. I draw the knife against my palm and step forward. The heat of the fire curls around my legs, but I keep my gaze forward. The familiar lines of Stoneheart's face are home in the dark night.

I press my bloodied palm against his chest and a crack of energy vibrates through the air. There's a collective gasp, and I look up. The surge of magic filling me with hope.

It takes until the bowl of fire to die out for the truth to be apparent.

It didn't work.

I pull my hand away from the stone. My blood leaves a nearly dried print. The stinging of my palm barely registers past the shattered feeling behind my sternum.

Someone clears their throat and suddenly Rowan is standing beside me. "Don't lose heart, lady. Fae magic is wily. We will find a way. This is merely our first attempt."

My chin dips in acknowledgment, and I take the wipe he hands me, pressing the antiseptic against the cut there.

I don't have any pretty words of encouragement but luckily no one seems to require them.

Stoneheart remains in a permanent sleep.

The candles get blown out, and people move to clean up the failed spell.

There's a soft touch to my elbow, and I look up at Zena.

"I'm glad the other potion worked," she says. "We'll try to break the curse again. Don't give up hope. I've never had so many people volunteer to give me hair and blood to make substitutions."

That is an uplifting distraction. The truth of Stoneheart's affliction isn't out yet, but the people know something is wrong, and have come forward wanting to help. This territory is a very different place than just last month.

But the other thing she said makes me frown. "The potion?"

She looks at my stomach, and her face softens. "The one Ben picked up. I was surprised he couldn't make it tonight."

Of course this is the potion master who made the fertility aid. The world is such a small place, and that reminder makes the absence of Ben

even sharper.

“Oh, yes, that.” I blush and try to disentangle myself from the conversation. “Let’s hope the next attempt to break the curse works as well.”

“There’s magic to hoping,” she says, and I nod politely.

I just wish hoping didn’t hurt so much.

BEN

THE COVER DROPS on the piano keys, and I'm startled to realize I'm no longer alone in the room.

This part of the house is out of the way enough that I'd chosen this piano as my favorite to let the chaos of my heart free since I'd begun living with Kalos. No one disturbs me here, and though it's a shared space, I thought of it as mine.

But it's really another place that doesn't truly belong to me.

Stoneheart offered you a piano, the thought is a whisper and is easily waved away.

It's no loss to be interrupted now. I haven't been able to touch the keys since leaving my heart in another territory.

"Do you need something?" I ask my boss.

Kalos's brows furrow in frustration. "No, but you do, and you're not going to find it while staring at a piano."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

He tilts his head. "I've always loved your tenacity, but this is ridiculous." His voice is gentle and that takes out the sting from his words. "You don't eat. You don't sleep. You're miserable, Ben. You've made the wrong choice."

I thought for a moment Stoneheart wasn't going to give me a choice, but it's been a week since the call where he threatened to hunt me down. If he really needed me, I wouldn't be here anymore.

"They've done fine without me."

“Aren’t you curious about the results of the voting?” Kalos asks.

I refuse to be tempted into asking. “They have it handled.”

“You don’t want to know if that councilor was successful in removing them from power? I hear he wanted to put Stella on trial.”

The outrage rises so quickly, it makes me nauseous. Which isn’t unusual of late. Kalos is right that I haven’t been feeling my best. “They wouldn’t.”

“They would.”

Violence lashes my insides at the idea that anyone would dare target my—what? Stella and Stoneheart don’t belong to me. All that’s left between us is a bond I can’t bring myself to let go of.

“The vote was in their favor,” Kalos says, interrupting my emotional upheaval.

I blink in confusion. “But why—”

“Because apparently the only one who is going to give you a wakeup call about ignoring your feelings is me. Maggie wants to give you space to heal, and Katarina thinks you should suffer for abandoning her friend.”

I flinch and focus on the glossy piano in front of me instead of the sear of pain I feel when Stella enters my thoughts. I hurt her, but she’s better off without me.

“I care deeply for you, Ben. Enough to let you go, but you have to act before it’s too late.”

“They don’t need me.”

“Do you think I need Katarina?” Kalos asks.

“Yes.”

Kalos would burn down the whole world if anything happened to her.

His lips twitch at my quick response. “That’s fair. Do you think that she needs me?”

I pause, because I wouldn’t say that. Katarina could survive just fine without Kalos. She wouldn’t want to be without him, though.

Kalos sighs as if sensing he’s making headway. “Loving someone isn’t about what you do for them.”

His scale covered hand grips my shoulder with meaning. “I know what it is to lose a mate and child, but yours are still here.”

The understanding in his golden gaze makes it hard to speak.

He continues, “Don’t make me fire you to get your priorities in order.”

After a moment I clear the ache from my throat.

“That sounds rather high-handed. I don’t have a place with them,” I say, and the excuse sounds terrible to my own ears.

Kalos snorts. “Did you ask?”

My phone buzzes, and I check it, frowning as I read the message.

“What is it?” Kalos asks.

“Zena. She’s calling in a favor.”

Kalos rolls his eyes, but with how valuable of a resource Zena is, neither of us would dare ignore her. “We aren’t done talking about this.”

“Repeating yourself doesn’t change anything,” I say even though something has shifted the doubt lodged in my chest.

“If there’s a chance to make you happy, I’ll repeat myself until I lose my voice.”

I blink, losing my ready reply in the face of his honesty, but Kalos only nods with satisfaction.

I teleport to my favorite potion master’s shop to escape the screaming demand in my soul that he’s right.

I made the wrong choice, and every action since then compounds that.

“I’m here,” I call out, needing a distraction. The eclectic mix of the shop isn’t enough to pull my thoughts away from the people I should be talking to.

Something falls in the back, and Zena bustles out. Her hair frizzy with energy and her eyes bright with obsession. I’ve never seen her so in the zone.

“Oh good!” she says. “I’ve been reading about this mushroom that needs to be harvested from a Nordic forest.”

“You want to go mushroom hunting together?” I ask, trying to temper her excitement. I don’t want this to be multiple days of trekking through the woods because she’s on the hunt for something she can’t live without.

I owe her a favor, but I do have my limits.

“Yes!” she exclaims, showing me an illustration of what looks to me to be an average looking mushroom. “I’m pretty sure that this one will help in the next attempt.”

“What next attempt?” I ask, but I should know better. If she’s on the tear for a specific thing, she’ll talk my ear off about it before we go, and I have places to be. Apologies to make.

“The attempt to break the curse on your gargoyle, of course!”

The bottom falls out of my stomach at the mention of Stoneheart.

Dread and alarm buzzes in my ears.

“What curse?” I ask carefully.

Her shoulders drop, and her look of shock only adds to my foreboding.

“You don’t know?”

STELLA

“WE WON.” My voice wavers, and I pull the blanket tighter around my shoulders. The night went later than I expected, and I assumed I’d be able to sleep without seeing my husband.

But I was wrong. I’m drawn here like standing too close to a stinging bonfire. It hurts, but the burn is better than the cold alternative.

“You wouldn’t be surprised at all,” I continue with a shrug. I’m not all that surprised either. I feel the difference in the territory since my attempted abduction and the downfall of our enemies. The fae lord who backed Frank and Leo still needs to be dealt with, but that’s a distant problem in a whole other realm, and the harpies’ ally might already have it in hand.

“I don’t think they even needed an heir,” I muse, but smile when my disturbance gives a pulse to remind me that it’s still here. Still ready to take on the world when the time comes. “I think they just needed to face their demons rather than live in fear. They had to feel a part of something.”

The charms probably helped...and me.

They see me as a leader. There may be the passing poetic whisper about me turning into some mourning ghost over my healing husband, but when it came down to it, they want to be led by me. Every meeting with a business owner or concerned citizen over the past week, every moment of care I gave to them, paid off.

It’s everything we wanted, and it feels hollow.

“I just wish you were here to see it.” I clear my throat and shiver. The blanket isn’t that thick, and I’m only in a sleeping slip under it. My bare feet have long since become numb. I should go in soon, but the same drive to see him stops me from leaving.

I take in the changes made around us.

Mom dropped by and prettied up the space. A couple of winter flowerpots and the string of fairy lights add a cozy element that nearly touches the shadow in my heart. There’s even a space heater that I was too stubborn to turn on, but now I sigh in defeat and click the button.

The makeover is a silent acknowledgment of what everyone knows.

I’ll be visiting this statue for the foreseeable future.

We may not be giving up, but I’m realistic enough to know that this may take longer than anyone wants to admit.

Perhaps I will become a ghostly visage up here alone.

“Stella.”

I suck in a breath and spin at the sound of his voice, so familiar even though I haven’t heard it in weeks. The tears welling in my eyes fall without permission.

Ben.

“You should have called me.” The stricken expression on his face stabs at my own wounded heart.

The flash of anger is instant, and I wipe the tears away. “Why would I do that? You left.”

He steps closer, and I take a step back. He looks...not as put together as he’s existed in my memory. His hair is sticking up in places, and there’s a smudge of dirt on his cheek. He wears a T-shirt and sweats in the place of his usual suit.

“You should’ve still told me.” he says, and the vehemence of it surprises me. “I could have been here.”

“Why?” I ask like I didn’t ache for that every night.

“Because I love you!”

“You have a shitty way of showing it,” I snap.

He winces but steps closer again, and when I retreat more, I bump into the immovable object that is Stoneheart.

“He’s been like this for a week, and I had no idea!” Ben’s voice breaks, and pain spills over his features.

It's clear in this moment that I'm not the only one he loves. I stole his opportunity to react to the state of the gargoyles we both care for.

My shoulders drop in momentary defeat. I lose the grip I have of the blanket, and it falls, pooling around my feet, but Ben reacts before my first shiver.

He hisses in dismay and grabs me around the waist, pulling me in. I make a sound at the warmth of him, my fingers digging into his fabric-covered shoulders.

"Gods, Stella! What are you wearing? It's freezing up here."

"Fuck you," I snarl, not ready to abandon my righteous anger for the sucking sensation of guilt.

Ben's eyes darken. "Let me take care of you."

"No," I say, but I don't push him away. The contact of our bodies is already sparking a heat low in my belly. "I don't need you to take care of me."

"I know, but I need you," he whispers.

Those words. They don't make up for the moments of loneliness and doubt, but they heal something.

My nipples press against his chest, hard and sensitive. There is no cold or stars above us. Only our mate at my back and a helpless anger in my chest even as my body comes to life under his touch.

"You abandoned us." The tears I wiped away return with a vengeance.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," he breathes against my lips.

I rear back, but the solid form of Stoneheart leaves no room for me to escape what my heart is clamoring for. Almost as if he's really here with us, guiding back together again. Our bodies and souls are like magnets. The impending crash of slow heavenly bodies. I'm caught in his soulful gaze.

Ben's grip on my waist tightens, and mutual momentum draws us in. This time when his face presses near mine, I tremble, panting against his mouth, needy for this connection even as I still suffer from the wound he dealt.

"I was wrong. Let me make things right," he says, as enraptured with me as I am with him.

His kiss is warm against my cold lips. All at once, the frustration rises and breaks. He abandoned me, but I forgave Stoneheart of the same crime.

I refuse to hold my hurts close to my chest until they poison everything. I reacted all my life to being cast aside upon birth. I won't let the fear of rejection steal this demon from me.

I won't be left alone with my memories and forget-me-nots again.

I wrap my legs around him, and he grinds his arousal into the cradle of my thighs. I make a helpless sound. The fabric of his sweats pressing against where I'm bare. I'm not wearing anything under the sleeping dress.

"Ben," I beg.

"Let me warm you up," he growls.

I make an impatient sound. I need him as reckless for this as I am. I claw my fingers into his hair, kissing him like I can keep him from disappearing on me again just by force. I almost sob at the acute need. My hunger is so sharp I taste blood and gasp.

He pulls back. A smear of red mars his lip, and shock reverberates through me.

I bit him. I marked him for all to see.

I open my mouth to apologize, but his gaze stops me. It's fire, and when he kisses me next, there's nothing contained about it. He devours me, groaning.

His erection pulses against me, and I make an impatient sound, pushing down his pants as he pushes up my dress. I'm almost surprised that I'm wet with how tumultuous this moment is, but his cock presses against my folds, smearing my arousal against my thighs before lining himself up.

He doesn't wait for an invitation before thrusting inside.

The stretch makes me moan, and Ben's kiss steals the sound. It's been an age, and I've been so empty. The sudden fullness eases something unwieldy in my heart.

"I'm staying," he growls against my mouth. Apparently wanting to have a conversation as he moves inside me.

I scowl, but it's impossible to hold on to anything other than the heat between us. "For how long?"

"Forever." His next thrust is hard and grinds my back mercilessly against Stoneheart's icy cold chest.

The tears stream down my cheeks unchecked. "Do you promise?"

Our eyes lock, and he slows his thrusts until the slow drag threatens to have me clawing him to go with the bite, but the look on his face hypnotizes me, absolute certainty.

He brings his hand up and wipes the blood from where it sluggishly wells on his lower lip, before placing it past me and against the statue. A fresh red mark to layer on the one I left with my blood during the ceremony.

“Cross my heart and hope to die,” he vows.

The oath buzzes with significance.

I buck my hips against him, urging him deeper, to take more. Pleasure and something darker making me want to claim this demon’s soul as surely as he has ours.

The stone heats and softens against my back, and suddenly we are wrapped in wings, cutting out the cold.

The rhythm of our thrusts stutter as a large hand holds my ass up, giving me leverage even as a tail snakes around and pulls Ben deeper inside me.

Another hand grips the back of Ben’s neck.

“I told you you’d only make it worse for yourself,” Stoneheart purrs.

Hearing him, being surrounded by his scent, the strength of his body around mine after days of heavy fear that I’d never see him again are too much to process. I come with a cry, my head thrown back against my husband’s shoulder.

“That’s it, firefly. Take our demon.” Stoneheart’s voice is low, and he pulls Ben harder against us, surging the demon deeper into me.

My body clutches hard around Ben’s as my hips move, wanting to be filled with him, wanting to consummate his promise.

Wanting to claim him for the two of us.

I pull down Ben’s shirt, ripping the collar until the bare skin of the crook of his neck is exposed.

Stoneheart doesn’t ask any questions before he strikes, sinking his teeth in to leave a claiming mark.

Ben is ours. Forever.

Ben cries out, ragged and complete as his seed pulses hotly inside me.

The stars burn above us, and there’s nowhere I’d rather be than between these two.

REMY

ONE MOMENT the world is cold, silent, and the next it's full of warmth and possession. I wake as if in a dream with my wife's back pressing against my chest, and the demon we both love surging inside her like he'll never have another chance.

They both come too soon, but I'm riding too high on victory to care. The witch and the demon are mine and have the marks to prove it.

The high feeling doesn't last because once Stella catches her breath, she starts crying.

These aren't silent tears or small hiccups. This is a torrential downpour.

"What did you do?" I hiss at Ben as he pulls out of her and slips himself back into his pants.

He shakes away his shock over just being bitten enough to answer. "She's crying about you. You kind of died."

"What?" I ask, but Stella turns in my arms and wraps her arms around my neck, pressing her face against my throat, her sobbing lowers in volume, but her shoulders still shake, and tears wet my skin.

Ben bends down and picks up a blanket that must have fallen to the ground, wrapping it around our witch who must be freezing. Why are we outside?

"A curse turned you to stone," Ben says. "You've been trapped that way for a week."

My brows raise, and I take in the roof of the Firefly. Memories drift back in. I remember the fear of Stella being taken. I tighten my arms around her, part to reassure her and part to comfort myself.

A whole week has passed since that moment. Time that I've missed, but the world has not. It's disorienting but not as important as the woman in my arms.

"Stella," I croon. "Please don't be upset."

"I'm so happy," she gasps out.

My lips twitch in humor, but I don't let that spill out.

Ben's eyes are glassy. It would seem my demon was affected by my predicament as well.

"So you returned?" I ask.

His jaw tightens before he answers. "I would have. I didn't know what happened until today. I came as soon as I finished foraging for a mushroom to cure you."

If my brows could raise more, they would. "A mushroom?"

"It was unpleasant," he says lightly.

I'll have to ask more about that later. I feel as if I'm floating. Not quite in the real world because I have no idea what's occurred. Only that I woke up during the best part of it.

Stella sniffs. "You were with the potion master?"

Ben nods. "She thought I knew what happened."

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you," she says against my skin, shame heavy in her words. Ah, my painfully independent wife has been suffering.

"I understand." He runs a hand over her hair.

The demon has returned, and I won't let him get away again, but now is not the time for tackling either of my mates.

I may be invigorated, but the exhaustion is clear on both of them.

Now is the time to take care of them.

I pull him into a group hug. It's time to get off this blasted roof. It's freezing. I tighten my hold on both of them and step off the roof.

Stella makes a rude sound, and Ben stiffens, but the glide to our bedroom balcony is a quick one.

"A little warning next time?" Stella growls, but it's a weak complaint. I swallow once we're inside. It's one thing to hear about Stella being

alone. It's another to experience it. The scent of her sadness is so prevalent here that I leave the doors open to air it out.

Stella keeps her head resting against my chest. Her breaths start getting heavier. She's obviously crashing after the rush of passion and emotion on the roof.

I place her under the blankets of the bed even when she shakes her head.

"Sleep, firefly. You need it," I say and kiss her soft lips, my heart in my throat. She's here, and she's safe.

"I don't want to wake up to find that this is all a dream."

"Don't mistake yourself for anything other than fearless," I say with soft pride. The proof of her grief is all around us, but she did not fall to it. "I will be here."

She sighs and within a moment is asleep.

Ben leans heavily against the bedframe to disguise his own weariness. Did neither of them sleep this week? I stand and gesture him to follow me to the bathroom.

He's frowning when he walks in and closes the door behind him, and his flinch of alarm when I pull off his shirt is delayed.

"What?" he asks in confusion.

"You smell like a bog," I say, not minding the smell, but there's a tightness to the demon that needs to be addressed since Ben isn't as dead on his feet as Stella.

And I want to see all of him. Touch him. Care for him. I'll do the same with Stella once she gets some sleep.

It's a pleasure as much as it is an honor to care for these two.

They both need it. Stella reeks of heartbreak, and Ben doesn't look like he's been much better. He's lost weight since we were last together, and his movements lack his usual surety.

I turn the shower on hot, giving him a moment.

Ben swallows and pushes down the sweats. For all his weariness and tension, he's still beautiful.

"I'm half expecting you to punish me for leaving her alone for so long," he whispers, stepping forward as if inviting me to do such a thing.

I sigh as I remove my kilt. "I'm displeased she took on such a heavy burden with only my people to help her, but we both know Stella. She

wouldn't want to invite you to share her pain if she thought you wouldn't stay."

I hold out my hand in invitation.

"I don't have much information on what's happened the past week. I've been avoiding news about the territory." He looks uncomfortable.

My lips curve. "I have Stella and Silas for that. All I want to do right now is hold you, and once the stink is gone, put you to bed with us where you belong."

Something loosens in him, and Ben takes my hand, allowing me to pull him under the hot spray. I'm transfixed by the sight of water running down the muscles of his back and over the swell of his ass.

I take a measured breath. Sex can wait.

I have the rest of our lives for the two of them. Whether he knows it or not.

Once he wets his hair I start washing it, enjoying the muscles in his shoulders and back relaxing for me.

"I'm still wearing the charm. I don't know how you can even smell that retched place still," Ben mumbles as I rinse the shampoo from his hair.

I arch a brow. It's not like I missed that he still wore the bracelet Stella gave him.

"It covers your scent and keeps other's inherent scents off you. It does not perform miracles. I'm touched that you went somewhere so foul to find a cure for me," I say.

Ben turns, his dark eyes full of promise. "It's the least I'd do for you."

His throat bobs. "When I heard you were cursed, I couldn't stop thinking about how I never told you—" He swallows again. "How I felt about you."

I'm sure my grin is wicked with how he shivers. "And how do you feel about me?"

If I were kinder, I wouldn't make him confess anything. But I'm not kind. I'm greedy.

"I think you know," he says with the jut of his chin.

"Of course I know, but I want to hear it. Just like you want to hear that I love you."

He blinks in surprise. "You do?"

“I do,” I confirm becoming serious, my thumb stroking the broken skin of my bite mark on his neck. “I wouldn’t have claimed you if I didn’t.”

“I love you too—” he breaks off when I kiss him. He groans in relief, and I may not be able to scent his emotions, but I can feel some fuzzy sensation in my chest that is him. The way it eases as his worries melt under my touch.

I keep the kiss simple and rest my forehead against his afterward. His body is a temptation that I will not give into tonight.

“I’m sorry I left,” he says.

I shrug. “You were overwhelmed and upset with me. It’s understandable. You’re not leaving again.”

“I don’t know where I fit here.” The confession is raw.

“With us,” I say. The answer is too simple for this detail-oriented demon, so I elaborate. “We will carve you the place you wish to have.”

Ben pulls away and a pained expression passes over his face. “I hear you claimed the child as your heir.”

My lips twitch. So much for avoiding news about us. “You’re still also the father. Now that you’re a part of our clan, we are legally both the father. That’s how it works for gargoyles.”

“I’m a part of your clan?”

“As of sometime this week. Silas should have filed the paperwork while I was sleeping.” Sleeping sounds like too benign a term, but it’s one that doesn’t leave his eyes looking haunted.

Ben frowns. “How is that possible without me signing anything?”

Illegally of course. I shrug. “Are you complaining?”

My eyes threaten to narrow when he doesn’t answer immediately and my hand draws down his arm, talon playing with the clasp of the scent blocking charm.

I do not want him to fight this, but maybe that’s what he needs?

“No,” Ben finally answers. “I want a place in your clan.”

I sigh in relief and toy with the clasp more. “No more hiding.”

He swallows. “No more hiding.”

Satisfaction blooms in my chest and I flick the clasp open.

The bracelet drops to the shower floor, and Ben’s expression is mournful for a moment before I pick it up and place it on the vanity.

“We’ll see if Stella can remove the magic from it,” I say. I wouldn’t want to forfeit a gift from our firefly either.

“I’d like that,” he says.

I turn off the water and can’t hold back the kiss I give him before leading him out.

“Come to bed, songbird. You roost with us now.”

STELLA

I WAKE BEING SPOONED by a gargoyle and nearly start crying in relief. My snuffle is cut off by his gravelly voice.

“None of that.”

I inhale. “I can’t help it.”

His arm squeezes me to his chest tighter, and I shudder in relief.

“How’s the baby?” he asks, probably trying to distract me from the emotional rollercoaster.

“As disagreeable as ever,” I say automatically, but hesitate. This is the first morning I’ve woken up without the need to vomit. “Actually, I feel pretty okay right now.”

He hums in thought.

“What?” I ask.

“Just a suspicion. Nothing else.”

“Stoneheart.”

“It will hardly make you feel kinder toward him if I’m right.”

Him. I swallow. I sensed his absence on waking up, but I tried to distract myself with appreciating that I have Stoneheart back.

Ben is gone. Even if I have a memory of sleeping between the two of them, the sheets in front of me are cold.

“You think that not being in contact with Ben contributed to the sickness?” I ask. Magical pregnancies have weird symptoms, so it’s not like this is unheard of.

“I think the distance made you both sick,” Stoneheart says.

That makes me feel a little better except for the fact that he's gone now.

Stoneheart kisses my throat. "He's coming back."

"Stop reading my mind."

He smiles against my skin. "I don't need to."

"Did he say he's coming back when he left this morning?"

He's promised me he was staying, and now he's gone. It's taking Stoneheart's hand moving down my body and groping my breast to keep me from lingering on the gaping chasm of disappointment in my chest.

I don't want Ben to break that promise to me.

"He didn't need to," Stoneheart says.

"Your confidence is astounding."

His chuckle is dark. "You enjoy my confidence."

I do, but I'm not going to admit that to him. His confidence in me is what made the past week without him possible.

"I missed you," I say, and it comes out with all the yearning and doubts that have tried to claw me down the past week.

Stoneheart rolls me under him, and his pale gaze captures my attention, scanning my face.

"I know. I'm sorry you had to handle that." He settles between my thighs, and I gasp at the contact of his skin there. He's naked, and I'm near to that.

I weave my fingers through his hair, stroking one of his horns and appreciating how his lids drop in pleasure.

I frown as I take him in.

"Where are your tattoos?" I ask.

I didn't notice last night what with my heart breaking and being put back together again, but his gray skin lacks the ink I enjoyed tracing so much.

"They must have been healed by the stone sleep. There's a reason why gargoyles don't usually have tattoos." Stoneheart dips his face to nuzzle the skin between my breasts left exposed by the way my sleeping dress gapes. "You can design the next tattoo I get. I want your mark on me."

Delight curls my lips. I'd like to give him some mark of mine to go with the bite mark he left on me and on Ben.

“You’re distracting me,” I say. Because as the minutes go by without sight of Ben, anxiety starts whispering doubts in my ear.

“Don’t you want to be distracted?” Stoneheart hooks a talon in my dress and shears the fabric in half. “You’re going to have to trust that he means to stay. You can’t let your fear—”

“I know, but knowing something doesn’t mean it’s easier to do,” I say, breathless. Though when it comes to being with either of these men, it’s easier to get over the fear when they’re touching me. Stoneheart’s long tongue traces the curve of my breast before circling my nipple.

I hiss, my toes curling at the instant hot but stinging draw when he sucks. His mouth eases he frowns. “Too much?”

“They’re a little sensitive.”

He rumbles. “Apologies, firefly.”

When he returns to the task, his mouth and tongue are gentle and make it hard to catch my breath.

I make a sound when I can hardly stand it anymore, and he releases me with a satisfied smile, licking over to the other one.

“He came running as soon as he found out you needed him,” he says even as I grind my need-softened pussy against his bare chest.

I scoff. “We needed him the whole time.”

I may have denied that last night, but that was out of spite. I want him with us always.

“Not to mention that he’s the reason the spell broke. It seems we needed the blood of both your mates to break it,” I say, having woken up enough to process what happened last night as Ben said his blood vow.

“Does that mean you’ll welcome him into our clan?” he asks.

“A clan? Is that what we are?”

He pinches my ass, and I gasp at the rush of heat that accompanies the tease.

“Yes, my highly capable wife. We are a clan,” he says, half exasperated.

I nod, done with my teasing. I want that official title.

“That’s if he comes back though,” I say.

Stoneheart flips me over, and I let out a yelp in surprise.

“Apparently I’m not doing a good enough job of distracting you,” he says. “Those doubts have no place here.”

I move to rise, chastened, but Stoneheart presses the space between my shoulders down until my chest and stomach rub against the bedding.

The dress is nothing but rags that he casts away before laying his body against mine. I make a satisfied sound. Being engulfed like this settles me.

His cock grinds against my ass, and my legs widen without need for instruction.

“I love having you like this,” he murmurs, and I bite my lip to keep from moaning as, with an adjustment of the angle of his hips, his heated length slides against my wet pussy. “Watching my knot disappear inside your wet and ready cunt is transcendent, but there’s something about having you under me like this that feeds my darker tendencies.”

He lifts my hips higher and grinds the side of his knot against my opening, and I moan into the sheets.

“Take me, Remy. I’m yours.”

“Of course you are,” he says as the head of his cock stops slipping teasingly through my folds and enters me.

We both moan as he sinks inside me. He doesn’t rush through the stretch. As soon as my pussy struggles against his girth he merely rocks in and out to coax me to open more, give him more.

With my chest on the bed like this, all my senses are full of him and the soft pace he’s setting. The heat of his skin against my back. The puffs of his breath on my scalp. The heavy weight of him inside me, moving in a way that makes my insides shiver and a tight sensation in my lower belly build.

I don’t try to rush him. I want every reassuring touch.

The pleasure he’s building tingles warnings in my limbs but doesn’t break free yet.

I lose myself to the soft movements and groaning praise. His knot brushes against my opening before he grinds it in deeper on the next rock.

“That’s it. Such a soft and beautiful mate begging to take me.”

I moan when I realize his intention. He won’t withhold any part of himself from me anymore.

I arch my back and try to soften around him even more. The rumble of Stoneheart’s growl against my back has me shivering as with the next thrust, his knot presses against me hard and insistent. The tight muscles of my body ease around the bulbous flesh, letting it slip inside me.

Tears fill my eyes as my soul, still so reticent to believe that this is all real, that I'm not alone anymore, finally gives.

The pressure is enough to release my own climax, and I cry out as Stoneheart holds me still, groaning so loudly that if there wasn't sound suppression magic involved, he'd wake the whole penthouse.

His cock pulses inside me as his cum fills me. The pressure sets off another surge of pleasure.

I think I must lose time because the next thing I know, Stoneheart is laying on his side, spooning me with our bodies still connected and sweaty.

A clearing throat has my eyes snapping open.

"Am I interrupting?" Ben asks, his cheeks flushed, and his expression part amused and part uneasy.

"About time you came back," Stoneheart says, making no move to remove his still very hard knot from me. "She's been desperate to see you."

My cheeks burn, but I can't deny it's the truth. Stoneheart flings the sheet back in invitation.

Something dark flashes in Ben's eyes as he takes in my trapped and stretched body and tosses his bag down, quickly undressing. He left to pack a bag. He didn't abandon us.

I squirm at my vulnerable position, but that only pulls against the knot trapped inside me and causes the gargoyles behind me to tut.

"Don't hide from him now. You've been wanting his presence all morning long, haven't you?"

"Yes," I say. Ben doesn't leave me waiting, sliding into the bed as soon as he's bare.

The kiss he gives me is rougher than I'm used to with him, but I need it. I need to taste his need.

Stoneheart makes a rough sound. "Fuck, my knot will never go down if you keep making her tighten like that."

Ben's smile when he breaks the kiss is part dazed and part mischief. "Something I'm sure you'd hate to experience."

Stoneheart huffs, but it sounds satisfied. His large hand comes to cradle my breast, massaging it softly before offering it to the demon.

"Careful. Your baby has made them sensitive," he warns.

Ben's nostrils flare, and there's something soothing about the possessive satisfaction on his face at the mention of the child we made.

"I will be," Ben says reverently before his head drops to worship my breasts with his mouth. The soft drawing sucks of his mouth has me losing my mind.

I moan and move as much as I'm able to while Stoneheart's knot swells even more inside me. Someone is rubbing my clit, but I can't quite track who.

My hands explore Ben. I didn't get much of a chance last night. The sensation of his smooth skin and heated shadows caresses my senses. When I get to his hardness against my thigh, I can't help but to stroke him.

He licks my nipple hard, and I shiver as he goes back to teasing them, switching to the next breast.

I inhale and nearly freeze at the scent of him. The dark sweetness. He's not wearing the charm. He really means to stay with us and officially be a part of our clan.

We're really going to be a family.

That beautiful revelation is interrupted by Stoneheart circling a knuckle against the delicate skin of my asshole. "And one day, you'll learn to take both of us."

I'm shaking my head before I even realize. "I saw how rough you were with Ben."

Ben gasps as I tighten my hold around him without meaning to. His cheeks are pink with a blush.

Stoneheart chuckles. "We'd prepare you much better. There's no need for the type of pain he likes." The knuckle disappears only to press against where I'm stretched around his knot before returning to tease me, wet with our mixed releases.

"And perhaps he'll be the one to take you here first. I'm sure he'd love to claim this part of you while we take you together."

Ben groans, his cock hardens in my grip at the picture Stoneheart is painting, and I can't help but want that too.

Through some magic, Stoneheart slips the swell of knot from me with a grunt. I lose my grip around Ben, and suddenly he's filling me.

It's a mess, but that doesn't stop Ben from making a deep pleased sound at fucking me while Stoneheart's cum oozes between us. It's so

slick, and I lose myself for a moment in thoughts of being marked by both of them like this, one after the other.

It makes it easier to accept the teasing stimulation of Stoneheart knuckle against my asshole. He must sense our demon beginning to break because he abandons taunting me and grabs Ben's hips, pressing his body hard against mine, sinking his nails into the skin.

The pain is always what Ben needs because he cries out, pulsing his seed inside me. Marking me with his scent as much as his cum. The act causes me to shake and shiver along with him, as much in the throes of passion as he is.

Stoneheart sighs with contentment.

The bright warmth in my chest hums along with my own magic as the truth of our connection becomes vibrant in its glory.

This demon has bonded the three of us together, and I want it to never end.

"Stay with us?" I barely breathe the question.

Ben kisses me. "You couldn't get me to leave even if you tried."

EPILOGUE

REMY

IT'S different seeing Stella in her wedding dress now than the day when we were married. The light of the bedroom makes her hair glow and dances over the lace and beading of the dress in the same way, but the impact to my chest is greater.

I was utterly obsessed with her then, struggling with the jealousy that she'd given herself to someone else.

Now, I'm utterly in love with her. I own her heart, soul, and the demon she brought a long with her. When I admire her tenacity it's because it's doing the best for the territory we run together. Her beauty still stuns me, but now her smiles impart secrets that I can read.

She was right. Love is an expansive thing, and every day with her and Ben, our lives grow.

And she's frowning at the new plant in the corner of the bedroom.

I clear my throat.

"You got a plant?" she asks.

"I'm surprised you could repair that dress," I say instead of answering her. I walk up and nuzzle my mating mark on the crook of her neck. "You look like a dream."

"Magic," she says and wiggles her fingers at me even as her cheeks pinken from the compliment. "Seriously though. You did some major damage to it the last time."

It's a testament to how far we've come that the memory doesn't darken her features. I was terrible to her that night, cold and menacing, stuck in a

fight with myself that nearly tore us apart. Yet she was strong enough to not only forgive me, but to tease me about it now.

Stella shrugs. "I thought it was fitting since Ben chose it."

"It does highlight his work well," I tease. My hand brushes over the barely-there swell of her belly, and I take a moment to admire the sight of the labradorite protection ring Stella crafted for me against the curve of her. I'm as viciously satisfied to wear a piece of her as I am that she carries a new future for us.

It's early yet, but Ben and I can't get enough of marveling over every change in Stella's body as she grows our child.

I'd never given much thought to being a father and can only take comfort that it's a role I'm sharing with Ben.

It's why I'm so adamant that we have this ceremony.

The exchanging of vows at sunset is the traditional way gargoyle clans make their matings official. It's odd to use the heritage that I've cast aside, but I want something that marks Ben as a part of us for all to see. Our guests have already started congregating on the roof, and I know there are separate parties occurring in our honor around the territory.

This area has calmed a great deal over the last month after the vote. It helped that the ally of the harpies was able to bring down the fae lord financing the disappearances. How harpies have a fae prince for an ally is a mystery, but I'm betting there's a story there.

We've even been able to recover some people. Unfortunately, others may never be found, but we'll keep looking.

"You didn't explain about the plant. You know I don't have a green thumb, right?" Stella asks.

"Your mother warned me. I promise that the plant is mine. I own it." My lips curve when she still doesn't understand the meaning. "Once upon a time, you told me if I wanted to own something, to get a plant."

Stella's confusion clears, and I think back to that very memorable car ride when she rejected being owned by me and told me that if I wanted to own something, to adopt a plant.

Her laugh is loud. "And so you got a plant. You own a great many things now."

I nod, my smile knowing. I still want to own everything, but having such riches tempers the craven need.

“Now I have you, Ben, a babe on the way, and a plant.” I swallow.
“And so much more.”

She leans against me, and I wrap my arms around her. The light of humor in her eyes softens with my meaning.

“And we own you just as much,” she says. “Maybe not the plant though.”

I snort, and we rock back and forth, looking at the monstera that Stella’s mother assured me is impossible to kill.

Eventually I check the time, arching my brow. Maybe I don’t quite own a certain demon yet.

“Do you think he’s going to be late to his own ceremony?” I ask.

Stella bites her lip and lifts a shoulder. “He likes his job, but he’ll be here.”

BEN

I'm late to my own wedding.

It's not a wedding exactly, but the end result is the same. It's a union of me to the couple I love, and I'm late.

But Timmy was missing his dad and wanted to play an extra game of checkers and knows I'm a sucker for that if he's done with his homework. His mother had to pull him away with a good-natured apology. The emotional scars of the family are healing well after their ordeal.

I'd taken a seat on the board that runs many of the programs in the territory with my focus being on the ones aimed protecting the children here. This after-school program is my brainchild.

It allows all children to receive mentoring by others in the community, and we're able to have a high enough security that even the rarer types of paranormals are comfortable with it.

It's an initiative to spark more unity in the territory. Our people should feel protective of the younger generation, especially rarer types that lack the built-in community of covens and packs.

And it's working.

But I have a tendency to stay too long, and sunset is approaching quickly.

When I teleport to our bedroom to get changed, it's empty.

They didn't change their minds, did they? I snort at my own foolishness. We didn't go through what we've gone through for them to get cold feet.

I teleport up to the roof, still buttoning my cuff links even as the in-between shadows clear to display the crowd of people that go silent at my appearance.

Stella is before me before the embarrassment catches my breath.

The sight of her dress freezes me. It's the same dress that nearly brought me to my knees when she walked down the aisle to the Devil. A confection of lace that clings to every curve of her body. She smiles and finishes buttoning a cuff link before fixing my hair.

"Right on time," she breathes. "Glad you could make it, Mr. Barnes."

I shake myself from my stupor. "I wouldn't miss this for the world. Sorry I'm late."

Her eyes sparkle, understanding what it is to get lost in one's work. "The sun still hasn't set. Shall we make this official?"

At my nod, the guests divide, and I swallow. Stoneheart is under an erected arch in the green space that Elena fixed up for us. She's in the crowd too, wiping away happy tears already since she missed this the first time around.

The scene is magical in more ways than one. There's a heating spell to keep the roof comfortable, but it's winter now and delicate snowflakes fall from a sky painted pink and orange by the low sun.

I hold out my elbow and when Stella takes it, I recognize the blue flowers in her bouquet and decorating the roof.

"You chose forget-me-nots?" I whisper as the music starts. They are out of season so they must be the result of some spell.

"Of course I did. They're the first gift you ever gave me, and they're carved into our bed," Stella says.

That makes me pause. I've never noticed that. Crafty gargoyle.

The distraction is almost enough to keep my nerves from overtaking me as we make it to Stoneheart. His pale gaze is warm at the sight of us. He takes Stella's hands first, to recite their vows as they didn't do it the traditional way for gargoyles last time.

When he gets to me, the grip on my hands grounds me in the moment. I'm home.

"As your clan leader," Stoneheart starts. "I pledge to you loyalty and trust. I promise safety and family."

My throat swells. *Family.*

He continues, "As your mate, I vow my life and love to you, through the brightest day and the darkest night."

It takes me a moment to respond. The words may be based on tradition, but they strike at my very core.

"I accept your vow," I say, and when Stoneheart kisses me, the crowd around us cheers.

It's a world of difference from when we were hiding our relationship, but the satisfaction rolling off Stoneheart indicates that he doesn't mind.

And I'm officially theirs. I can barely breathe a laugh at the overwhelming amazement making my chest tight.

People gather round, and it's almost a blur with how fast my heart is beating. Kalos congratulates us. Maggie is crying and hugs Stoneheart tight enough that the gargoyle blushes.

It makes it even better that don't have to lose my family to add to it.

Stoneheart grudgingly accepts Lobo's well wishes. Their personalities clash, and he still isn't thrilled how close of an ally the wolf shifter is to Stella, but he'll never undermine her work by complaining about it.

And then the dancing starts. Since it's my only ceremony, Stella demanded that Stoneheart and I have the first dance. We'd done a few lessons in preparation so I finally feel like I can take a full breath even though it feels like everyone's eyes are on me.

"How does it feel to be mine?" Stoneheart asks, close enough to my ear that I shiver.

"And Stella's," I interject without sharpness. He likes to be possessive. "It shouldn't feel any different than this morning, but..."

Stoneheart merely nods. It does feel different. To proclaim our relationship publicly after beginning in shadows makes this feel more permanent. I see why he was so insistent that we do the ceremony.

"And I didn't even have to fight a dragon for you," Stoneheart says.

I huff a laugh. "Kalos once teased that he'd charge a bride price for you to have me."

"Ah," he says in understanding. "Fortunately for me, Kalos knows demanding one now would be unsportsmanlike."

I frown in confusion.

Stoneheart smiles. "Because I'd pay any price to have you."

I blink in amazement as he continues, “And that’s no fun for an old lizard like Kalos.”

The song ends while I’m still trying to form words. Stoneheart kisses me, and Stella cuts in like we’d planned.

“Did he scramble your brain?” she asks. Her much smaller hand in mine helps bring me back from gargoyle husbands and sweeping declarations.

“I forget how much he devastates me with the simplest words.” I clear my throat. “And you too, but you’re much more efficient at making me want to fall to my knees with a single glance.”

My eyes drag down the dress. It looks exactly the same despite the damage Stoneheart did to it, and that makes me want to be the one to rip it off her this time.

“You’re too beautiful for words, mate,” I say, testing the term out with her. I like it.

Her blush has my breath catching. When can we start the wedding night?

Stoneheart crowds in, his wings wrapping around the two of us as his lips run over her shoulder.

“You can’t have too much fun yet. We have the rest of the night before I can get the two of you into bed. If your scent gets much more delectable, I don’t know if I’ll be nearly as patient,” he says to Stella.

Her smile is sly. “Sorry. I’ve been wearing something special to prepare for Ben’s courting gift,” she says with a wink that I feel in my gut. “It’s very distracting.”

Both Stoneheart’s and my body tightens when her meaning becomes known. She’s wearing a plug in her ass.

I curse as my cheeks become hot, and Stoneheart’s eyes glitter evilly.

His voice is all gravel. “I’ll make you pay for that, firefly. We have at least an hour yet.”

She shrugs. Not bothered that I might have to hide behind the refreshments to wait for my erection to subside. If it does, now that I know she’s planning on letting me claim her ass tonight.

“I didn’t want to take any chances of your tender care later,” she teases. “You’re both much too rough with each other for my liking.”

I inhale at the memory of how Stoneheart feels inside me. He'd done that just last night, as hard as I needed it to dissipate my nerves about today.

Fuck. It's going to be torture if we can't get away soon.

STELLA

I DON'T PREDICT that it's Ben who breaks first. One minute I'm speaking to Ariel and wishing her well before she departs, and the next, arms wrap around me and the world lurches through shadows.

I squeak. We discovered that I can see the in-between that Ben can travel through when he teleports now that we're bonded, but I still prefer to close my eyes.

I only have time to see the familiar shapes of our bedroom before he turns me around and silences my laugh with a kiss.

When it breaks, his forehead presses against mine.

"I couldn't wait another minute to do this," he says and his hands grip on either side of the line of buttons down my back and rips my dress apart. The buttons snap and fly off with my gasp.

I'm left in my bridal lingerie which his dark eyes feast on while he's discarding his own clothing as quickly as he can.

The balcony doors open and our devil saunters in. "Naughty mates getting started without me."

"She's too much of a temptation," Ben says.

Stoneheart hums in agreement, taking in the bridal lingerie. He sheared through the last set too quickly to be able to admire it. This bridal set has less structure than the last, barely being scraps of lace to make room for the fact my stomach and boobs are larger.

A fact that both my mates enjoy.

“That she is,” Stoneheart says. “Check to see how the plug is opening her ass. I find I’m too much in a hurry tonight to draw this out.”

The kilt the gargoyle wears falls to the floor at the same time as Ben spins me toward the bed and bends me over. My hands catch the edge and help me balance as I moan and present where a plug is nestled between my ass cheeks.

Ben pulls the strap of my lacy thong back and forth against the metal, and the rasp of it has my toes curling. He must be impatient as well because he changes the tension and allows the sodden garment to move past my hips and fall to the floor.

“Her pussy is pretty swollen,” Ben observes. “I think she’s been suffering as much as we have tonight.”

“It’s been a little torturous,” I say, still in good humor. Every move reminded me of what I’d be experiencing tonight. It’s a wonder I didn’t taunt either of them into breaking before now.

Ben drags his fingers up the back of my thigh and when he skips touching my pussy at all I want to sob.

He’s picked up some tricks from the Devil when it comes to torturing me.

Instead, Ben tugs on the plug, and my pussy floods at the heavy tightness of it.

“Oh!” I exclaim. I didn’t think I’d be so sensitive after wearing it all night long.

He presses it in again, and I clench on it with a gasp.

“It seems to have done a lot of the work of opening her up,” Ben says.

“Good. Take it out.” Stoneheart’s voice has a hard edge that makes me want to give in to all his demands.

I make a needy sound as Ben slowly pulls the toy from me. My asshole pulls against the metal. I hiss a breath when the widest part is about to leave me and whimper when Ben pushes it back in before tugging it again.

Stoneheart’s large hand runs down my back, his breath skating over my upturned ass. “Oh, firefly, you’re so sensitive here.”

The plug slips the rest of the way out, and an undignified high sound leaves me.

Now, I feel doubly empty and wet.

Stoneheart sits beside me on the bed and plucks me up, positioning me to straddle him before laying back.

“You sound like you need something before our demon claims your ass,” he says as his hard cock smears through where my arousal is gathered on my thighs and against my need-swollen pussy.

“Yes,” I say, nodding. I’m so primed that the head of his cock slides into my pussy on an easy glide. We both sigh at the stretch.

It only takes a couple thrusts for the flare of his knot to press against my opening, and I grind down. My lashes fluttering as I finally feel full for the first time tonight.

“Hungry, firefly.” Stoneheart chuckles. “If I knot you, there will be nowhere for our demon to fit.”

I don’t have the same instinctual compunction to take his knot as much as before. Probably because he gives it to me so freely now or perhaps because I’m pregnant, but that doesn’t mean I don’t still want the ache of his stretching me.

But this time I’m going to be stretched differently

I roll my hips, enjoying the feel of Stoneheart inside of me as Ben rounds the bed to the nightstand. He removes the bottle of lube we keep there.

It gets plenty of use between Stoneheart and him, but the gargoyle has been teasing Ben and me with this moment where Ben gets to lay first claim to my ass for weeks. Instructing Ben to slowly stretch me with his fingers before we all lose patience and dissolve into our usual intimacies.

Now I watch my demon mate stroke his lubed cock as he approaches and squeeze around the gargoyle inside me.

Stoneheart moans before sighing and lifting me high enough for him to fall free. I make a sound of disagreement, wanting to be filled again.

“Slow, firefly, let him forge his way inside you before you add more to it. We don’t want to break you,” Stoneheart says, playing softly with my overly sensitive nipples.

“Okay,” I pant. “But please hurry.”

Ben shakes his head, his face soft. “Relax, love. We can be patient.”

I want to squirm when he comes up behind me and kisses my neck. There’s something wild in me that doesn’t want to take it slow, but when my lovers make demands, there’s a joy in following them.

The slick head of Ben's cock slides against my asshole, and I focus on the sensation, on relaxing to let him in. With a breath and a slight burn, the tip of his cock penetrates me.

Ben groans. "That's it. Fuck, you feel so hot here."

My skin flashes icy and hot, but I keep breathing. He doesn't push forward yet, letting me adjust to him there.

It doesn't take long until other sensations return to the forefront. Ben's panting breath against my neck, the pulse of Stoneheart's length against my messy pussy. The way they both lightly touch my skin, letting the harsher sensations in my body settle.

When Stoneheart starts circling his thumb around my clit, I moan and press back onto Ben, needing more. We both moan as I take more of him inside me. The burn fades, and all that's left is the stretch and need kindling in my belly.

"You're taking him so well," Stoneheart purrs.

"Gods, Stella, I could die like this," Ben says as he moves in and out with soft thrusts.

"No dying yet. Our firefly wants more still." We lock gazes as Stoneheart taunts me, the tip of his cock pressing against the opening of my pussy.

Everything takes on a needy haze, and I nod. The idea of both of them inside me already starting a wildfire that I can't put out.

Ben adjusts behind me and suddenly Stoneheart is inside me with an aching slide.

I choke. "Holy fuck!"

My two men curse.

"So tight," Ben groans, his voice full of marvel. "I can feel you through her."

"Stella?" Stoneheart checks in. "Breathe for me."

I inhale raggedly, not realizing I'd stopped taking in oxygen.

"Feels good, gods yes," I ramble. I can't possibly be responsible for something like sounding coherent while being split open.

Everything feels so loud. The bond that vibrates between us brightens as our bodies pulse in time.

It's too much, but not enough.

"Please, more," I beg.

Stoneheart growls as his cock tunnels deeper. Ben holds still until the gargoyle is as deep as he can get without sinking his knot inside me.

He was right. There would have been no room for Ben with the knot.

Ben makes a deep sound and begins to move as if he can't help the soft rock of his hips.

"Yes," I breathe as waves of sensation flow through me. Stoneheart's hips move counter to Ben's, and I lose track of what I say or the sounds from the back of my throat as they remake me together.

I'm nothing but sensations and emotions. Bright light mixes with dark impulses. Jealousy, frustration, and coldness have been conquered. Every path we tread to get here is worth it. To be one.

When the world explodes, it does so in a shower of sparks and a crashing wave of pleasure. Ever-expanding love and magic define us.

Completes us.



"WE CAN TRY for a gargoyle next time," I hum as Stoneheart palms my stomach after cleaning me up. We're going to need to switch out the shower with a bath if they're going to want to stretch me into oblivion on the regular.

Ben's sigh is satisfied as he kisses my shoulder. He seems halfway to falling asleep.

"Next time?" Stoneheart teases. "I didn't know you were enjoying pregnancy that much."

I scrunch my nose. "The queasiness isn't so bad now that Ben's around. Sometimes I even catch sight of the magic of pregnancy that everyone raves about."

His chest rumbles in a purr. "I'll gladly accept as many children as you want to have."

I bite my lip, treading carefully. "Do you think it's possible for you to father them?"

It's been a mystery to me how Ben was the one to father our child with how careful we were. Stoneheart wasn't shy about filling me to the brim.

Now Stoneheart's face flushes.

“Ah, yes. Well—” he breaks off. “About that...”

I watch him, curious what has him so uncharacteristically embarrassed. Even Ben opens an eye, sensing the change.

Stoneheart scratches behind a horn, awkward and unsure.

“I may have forgotten that some years ago I purchased a ring after drinking too much,” he says with a wince before sliding a thin one of his rings off and handing it to me. My eyes widen when I get a feel of the subtle magic without the glaring influence of his other charmed rings.

He continues, “It was the anniversary of my parent’s passing. And I guess I picked up this piece to avoid committing his same crime. In my drunken state, that meant vowing never to father a child.”

The room descends into silence for the span of five heartbeats.

My lips twitch in mirth. “You’ve been on birth control the whole time?”

“I have a lot of jewelry. I hadn’t taken inventory in years,” he says even as the gray skin on his cheeks darkens.

Now I’m laughing. He scowls at me.

“I’m sorry, it’s just funny,” I say.

“I didn’t do it on purpose,” Stoneheart says to a stunned Ben.

Ben snorts before dissolving into a sleepy laugh.

“Glad you’re not accusing me of trapping you,” Stoneheart says sourly, but his lips are twitching.

Ben wipes his eyes. “It did work out quite nicely in the end.”

“It would have always worked out,” I say and Stoneheart frowns at me. It’s quite a change of tune from my doubts when Ben left us, but I believe it now. I just needed time for the beliefs to cement. “If only because you’d never let it not.”

“I, for one, am relieved that you have some flaws,” Ben says as I hand Stoneheart back his ring, relieved to have that mystery solved.

“Other than being a controlling ass?” Stoneheart asks.

I hum in agreement. I enjoy that flaw of his.

“What’s life without a few flaws?” I ask.

“Boring.” Stoneheart’s eyes glint. “Which it will never be with the two of you.”

I like the sound of that.

The End

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Hello Dear Reader!

Thank you for reading Married to the Devil!

For the sake of transparency... I struggled for the longest time writing this book.

I love it. The tension with these three continually kept me coming back, but I kept being afraid to make Stoneheart as mean as I knew he needed to be at the beginning. He's such a departure from the coziness of the Bramblewicks in Deceived by the Gargoyles, but he's had a very different life, and Stella needed a different type of mate. Their dynamic *needed* to need a Ben to smooth things over.

It needed to be messy.

In the end, I had to be brave and let the gargoyle break things and make mistakes in order to fix them and I'm so glad I did.

I want to take this moment to thank my readers. You are the reason I can do this, and I am continually grateful.

A big shout out and thank you to my beta readers, Finley Fenn and Sue, who helped shape this tale into something I'm truly proud of. Your input was invaluable, and I wish all the best things for both of you.

With the end of this project, my heart is full, and I wish everyone happy reading,

L. Lark

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lillian Lark was born and raised in the saltiest of cities in Utah. Lillian is an avid reader, cat mom to three demons, and loves writing sexy stories that twist you up inside.

More information about Lillian can be found on her website at LillianLark.com